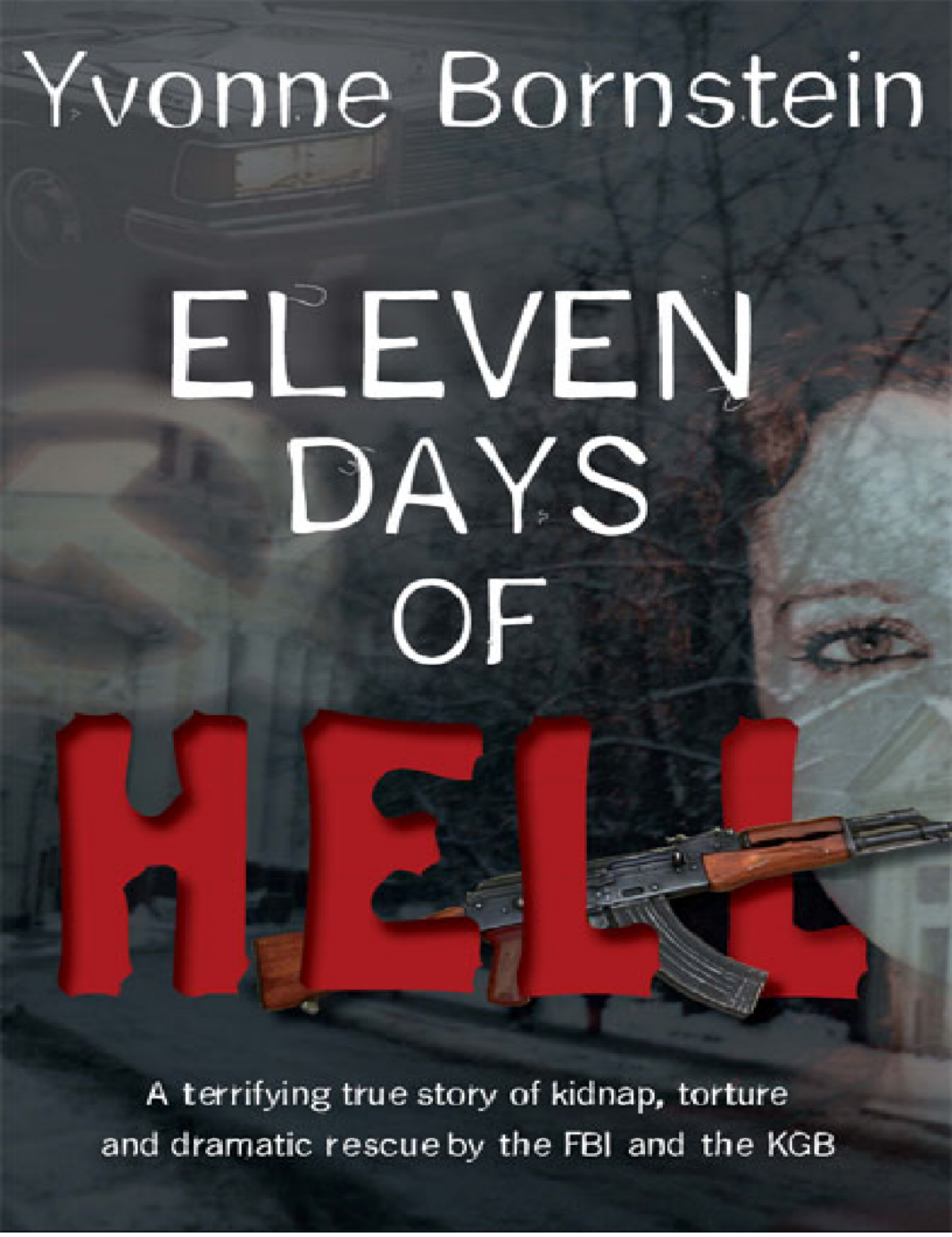
Yvonne Bornstein

ELEVEN DAYS OF HELL



A terrifying true story of kidnap, torture and dramatic rescue by the FBI and the KGB

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

A terrifying true story of kidnap, torture and dramatic rescue by the FBI and the KGB. Chechen terrorists linked to Al-Qaeda orchestrate a Moscow abduction, holding westerners Yvonne and her husband Danny hostage for $1.6 million they don’t have. It will take enormous courage and an international rescue effort to bring them home. ELEVEN DAYS OF HELL is the chilling true story of kidnap, torture, rape and survival. Yvonne Bornstein relives the trauma that still has the power to make her shake with fear.

- Yvonne Bornstein
  - ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
  - INTRODUCTION
  - 1
    - 2
    - 3
    - 4
    - 5
    - 6
    - 7
  - 8
    - 9
    - 10
    - 11
    - 12
    - 13
    - 14
    - 15
    - 16
    - 17
    - 18
    - 19
  - 20
    - 21
  - EPILOGUE
  - About the Author
  - Photographs
  - Copyright

Yvonne Bornstein
ELEVEN DAYS OF HELL

For my mother, Billie.

I survived this horrific ordeal because I inherited your strength and courage.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although the events in this book seem in my mind to have happened only yesterday, I could not have written about them until enough yesterdays had passed for me to be able to see those events in the overall perspective of my life. But, just as crucially, it also could not have happened until enough people encouraged me to write it. For this reason, I consider all of the following people my 'co-authors,' for without them you would not be looking at the book before you now. I say a collective thank you to all of them, for accompanying me on a journey into uncharted waters and for holding my hand at various points to keep me from drowning. My heartiest, and most heartfelt, appreciation goes to: My parents, Billie and Wally, for their unlimited supply of love and devotion, and for always believing in me. My husband, Sam Bornstein. Through Sam, I found myself. My sisters, Jan and Erica. My beautiful daughters, Romy and Melanie. Rhonda Kohn, my best friend and confidante, who not only stands by me but sometimes has to pull me out of the mud. Mike Carmona, one of the few people I trusted to read the manuscript as it was being written. His valuable feedback helped keep the boat going in the right direction. I am especially grateful to my former husband and the father of my daughter Melanie, Daniel Weinstock, one of the kindest men I have ever known, for reliving the pain of the nightmare so that this book would be factually thorough and accurate. Only Danny could recount in vivid detail his own desperate hours when we were kept apart during those eleven days of hell. He provided documentation that filled in the gaps. I hope that by telling this story, I can ease his pain as much as I eased my own.

I would also like to express my deepest appreciation and admiration to three men who generously took time from their busy schedules to jolt their memories about events that grow more distant each year. Though I didn't know it at the time, they were working day and night to save my life. A multiple thank you from the bottom of my heart to Dimitry Afanasiev, Gerry Ingrisano, and James Pelphrey.

Dimitry, brilliant lawyer that he is, is a practiced orator, yet he is more than that. A humanist, he brought an emotional attachment to saving the lives of two people he didn't know, which still warms my heart. He also has an expertise in Russian affairs and terrorist activities, and when he traced my kidnappers to Osama bin Laden's murderous al-Qaeda network, it made my heart pound.

Gerry is a longtime FBI agent, and James a veteran diplomat. Neither is prone to patting himself on the back; 'All in a day's work' is their motto. Yet they gladly went back and researched their roles in

my story. I will never be able to thank them enough for their efforts, but I hope this book makes clear the underlying lesson in the work these men did: Nothing is impossible when people care enough.

INTRODUCTION

This book tells the story of eleven days out of my lifetime of forty-eight years, eleven days of terrible events, frozen fear, unimaginable degradation, and constant anticipation. And yet, at the risk of sounding flippant, I can honestly say that the thought of writing this book was just as terrifying in its own way. Actually, the writing of any book would be a challenge for me on the order of climbing Mt. Everest. I would hardly describe myself as a shrinking violet—talking about myself has never been as easy as going out and being myself. I've done many things, admirable and otherwise in those forty-eight years, but it has only been recently that I've been able to learn what's inside me that makes me, well, me.

This book posed an enormous challenge, one much more stringent than merely scaling Everest. It required that I look back at things I had pushed hard out of my memory, never again wishing them to come back in. It also forced me to look so deeply inside of me that it felt like I was performing surgery on myself. Imagine excavating your own liver and you'll get the point—and a very painful point, I might add. Only in my case, I wasn't aiming at my liver but something more vulnerable: my innermost feelings.

In the same way that my ordeal of terror had a happy ending, I am pleased to say the operation went quite well, thank you. Both patient and surgeon are doing fine. In the end, writing all of these pages seemed to have exorcised the pain, if I may be so trite. It was no picnic, but to have gotten through the whole book is the dessert, the Pavlova pie. It really tastes delicious!

Not that I am pronouncing myself completely cured of the residual fear I've lived with for the past twelve years. Far from it. The old saying that goes, 'Time heals all wounds,' is not true, at least not for me. Some wounds can never heal. Some are too intimate, too brutal, too dehumanising. That is why it took twelve years for me to even attempt to write my story. Many times during those years, I tried another form of self-surgery, using a home lobotomy kit to numb my memories and feelings. However, there could never have been enough anesthetic to fully numb myself, and not enough bricks and mortar in the world to build a wall high enough around the memories. If I pat myself on the back for writing a whole book, that same patting hand will still tremble when I wake from a nightmare in a cold sweat, as I do often.

Reliving those terrible eleven days with pen in hand is one thing; reliving them involuntarily in a dreamlike state and not knowing if it's real and happening all over again is quite another. Dealing with them

—and the unyielding fear that I'm still in danger, that people are lying in wait for me around the next corner—is what psychiatrists get paid for. I know. I've paid enough of them. If I can walk alone outside in the glorious sunshine and smile, if I can laugh with my husband or spend time with my beautiful children, it's a good day. A very good day. There are more of them now.

In a very real sense, writing the book was a form of therapy, though I take no credit for understanding that beforehand. The idea to write a book came from my current husband, Sam. Though Sam came into my life after the events described herein, he could see from an objective distance how damaged I was as a human being. One consequence of those events had been the collapse of my previous marriage to Daniel Weinstock. Danny, like me, is Australian. Together, we built a thriving, global, commodity barter trade business. We were one of the very few Australian companies to do business in Russia, both before and after the fall of the Soviet Union. If you are not familiar with this shadowy occupation, these pages will open your eyes. Suffice it to say, we sometimes bent the rules of business and ethics, and partnered up with shady characters that we could never really trust.

Though we didn't know it at the time, we fell into a spider's web of Russian villains that included underworld gangsters, defrocked KGB agents, and half-crazed gypsies from freshly-minted Russian republics given their freedom in the early 1990s. Those who are familiar with post-Iron Curtain events may know the particularly bloody history of one such republic, Chechnya, where bloodthirsty nationalist rebels evolved into the monsters we know today as al-Qaeda. Although my husband and I knew little of this developing history at the time, we may have been known to them. In the early '90s, terrorist 'sleepers' began to practice methods of financing their bloody deeds by kidnapping and extorting Western businesspeople. Like us, most people had never heard of the sinister group until after that tragic and horrendous September 11th morning of 2001. It certainly surprised me—shocked is a better word—that I may well have been a seminal target of opportunity for Osama bin Laden.

When Bob Woodward, the reporter who blew the lid off the Watergate scandal so long ago, came out with his inside account of the march to war against Iraq, Plan of Attack, I read with great fascination that the Bush administration's Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz entertained the theory that today's terrorists are linked to remnants of old Iron Curtain spy operatives and that unnamed 'heads of state' had warned him specifically that al-Qaeda may be working with ex-KGB officers. No offense, Mr Wolfowitz, but I already knew that, having been victimised by those conjoined forces

of evil a dozen years ago.

I can only imagine how many other unfortunate Western businesspeople have been caught in that frightful nexus and suffered a similar—and, sadly, worse—fate than I. For this reason, I live with the fear that the saga did not end, and will not end until the people who kidnapped me finish the job. I have been told that those al-Qaeda sleepers have long memories and an unquenchable thirst for revenge, that once they start something, they will complete it, no matter how many years it takes. I suppose I will forever have that fear. I must live my life in spite of it.

This book will open your eyes to many things, including the utter breakdown of anything resembling law and order in Russia in the years since the fall of Communism—an ironic consequence indeed, given the wide-eyed expectation of a free and democratic society when the wall came tumbling down. I hope that one of the enlightening elements in this book is presenting this under-reported story, which serves as a critical backdrop to my own.

All of the diverse and terrifying conditions that surrounded our business and the devolution of Russian society coalesced for me on January 6, 1992, minutes after landing at the airport in Moscow, commencing what would be seemingly endless physical and mental torture by swarthy, greasy men obviously hired to carry out a very detailed plot of abduction and ransom—in our case, $1.6 million. As much as I try, I cannot wash away the faces of those men. They were like masks of death. Worse, I cannot wash away their smell. It is a stench I will never be able to forget.

In a page-one article in The New York Times dated January 18, 1992, the drama was described, aptly, as something out of the novel Gorky Park, while the lively Australian tabloids played the story with headlines such as, 'TORTURE HELL IN MOSCOW' and 'TERRIFIED TWO THRASHED BY GYPSY SADISTS.' For Danny and me, unaware of the entertainment value of the abduction, there was only one thing that mattered: survival.

Only in later years did I become fascinated and riveted by the breadth of the story. Thus, I went to great lengths to reconstruct and retrace the steps and the players of the rescue mission, which I had no idea was even going on at the time. This task required much research that included personal interviews with many people, some merely remotely involved with the case. The filing of the Freedom of Information Act requests initially were met with stalling or outright refusals. Finally, I was allowed to see the sheaf of documents attendant to my case, albeit some had pages with so many sentences stricken by big, black strokes of Magic Marker that almost nothing was left to read. Even so, the clues they provided were priceless.

I should say a few words about the structure of the text, lest anyone gets confused. My part in the story is related in a first-person narrative. However, there were events I was not part of and therefore did not see occurring; these, as well as some necessary speculation about why those events occurred, how they evolved, and what the motivations of certain people were, are set in italics with descriptive subheads. Certain events involving Danny I learned about only later, from Danny, and I am indebted to him for reliving the story along with me.

I should also point out that the names of some of the characters in the book have been changed for legal reasons. The fact is, certain people simply prefer that their identities not be revealed in a book, and the nature of this book justifies such a concern. Some who committed crimes were, for reasons to be seen, never convicted, or given light sentences without having to own up to the full extent of their crimes. Others committed crimes of omission, failing to prevent crimes they saw.

These people, who know who they are, live with private guilt. Still others realise the bloodthirsty nature of the people who kidnapped Danny and me, and their sense of retribution. While I gratefully thank the characters who gave their permission to be identified, I wish to see no one become a target of vengeance. Indeed, I share the same fear, every day of my life. However, I want to stress that the factual veracity of the story has not been compromised. Every other detail has been scrupulously verified.

Although I did survive, my life would break into pieces in the years after my ordeal. Fortunately, the pieces were put back together again by Sam, my husband. Part of his method was to tell me, in no uncertain terms, to forget about my self-pity and confront my devils head on, and to appreciate how good it is to be alive so I could finally drive on down the road instead of spinning my wheels in the mud. As usual, Sam was right, in many ways even he didn't realise. In challenging myself and in creating my own growth, I hope that others —especially women who read this book—can grow as well, through me. One lesson of my story concerns this currently in-vogue notion of women's self-empowerment. For me, that's just a fancy way of saying we can do anything, survive anything, and come away more complete. Never did I believe I could be as strong on the inside as I turned out to be. I may have thought I was, but deep down I didn't really believe it. Now I do.

Maybe the best thing I can say about myself is that at least I'm up to climbing Everest now. So, I hope you'll pardon me if you pass me on the street and you hear me shouting encouragement to myself. All I really would like you to know about me is that the person behind the

words on these pages is a lucky and grateful ducky from Down Under who, at age forty-eight (I don't plan to get any older, or at least admit it), can say she has lived many lifetimes already—and hopefully has several more patiently waiting their turn. And wait they'll have to do. For me, it's not one day at a time but one lifetime at a time. The defining moment of my life came on that bleak morning in 1992 when I fully believed I was about to die and prepared myself for death to come. As it turned out, that was the moment when I had just begun to live.

PART ONE
THE BACKGROUND

1

THE DACHA, EARLY MORNING, THURSDAY, JANUARY 16, 1992

My eyes opened after a fitful few hours of sleep to see a silhouetted figure looming closer through the darkness. Instinctively, my head shot up from the narrow, rickety bed.

'Danny? Is that you?' I called out.

Before the last word echoed in the airless room, the answer came as if with a kick in the stomach. When the shadowy wraith got close enough, I saw not the face of my husband, Danny, but rather the tall, bony, meticulously-groomed woman with the ever-present scrunchie around the bun of her dark-brown hair whom I knew only as 'Rae.' Her dark eyes darted nervously from side to side as she motioned furiously for me to get myself on my feet. In half-broken English and Russian, she told me to pack whatever belongings I had strewn on the cold, wood floor into the two gray suitcases propped next to the bed and come with her.

Stumbling out of the rickety bed, I checked my Bulova watch—one of my few possessions that had not been taken from me. It said 3am. Normally, I would be awakened at sunrise, but even before Rae's appearance, my sleep had been made even more restless by the fact that Danny had been taken from the house earlier on this night, ostensibly to arrange a ransom delivery for our kidnappers. I had been terrified ever since, consumed by frightening illusions that he would never return alive, that something would go wrong, that he would be killed and they'd come back and do the same to me.

I always kept the harsh light bulb on the ceiling burning when I slept, as I didn't want to feel any more defenseless than I already was in this house of horrors, but outside, beyond the thick metal bars attached to the windows, it was dark as pitch. Would I live to see the morning?

I was fully dressed, again as a means of self-defense, as if my now-pilling, blue, cashmere sweater and matching top and pants could be a makeshift suit of armor against the daily beatings I had suffered. Never, for reasons that had become sickeningly clear only two days before, did I ever want to be undressed and naked to the mortal dangers in the horror house that had been my tomb for the past ten

terrible days.

I climbed off the bed, threw everything into the suitcases, and sat back on the bed to slide into my slippers—the only footwear I was left with after my shoes were taken from me. Indeed, sometimes my captors wouldn't even let me wear the slippers. Instead, if they allowed Danny and me to go outside to relieve ourselves—the pipes in the bathroom in the house were always frozen, making it unusable—we would have to go barefoot, hoping we could get done fast enough so as to avoid hypothermia.

I felt myself being guided through the piece of hanging cloth that served as a door and out to the landing atop a long set of stairs. I could only carry one suitcase, so I grabbed hold of the heaviest one with both arms and began dragging it down the staircase.

By now, my sleepiness had receded, my eyes forced open by the adrenaline pumping through my body. Sights and sounds were swirling in my brain. Three steps down, I peered through the funereal atmosphere that hung in the air of the dacha, or country house in Russian, and saw the man I knew as Oleg, who was Rae's husband, at the far end of the kitchen at the foot of the stairs, hand on hip, leaning against a small table near the television. Ominously, he was shaking his head from side to side as though something was wrong.

As cloddish as Rae was refined, Oleg—like most of the dozen or so men who at some point or other had joined in holding Danny and me prisoner in the house—stood around six feet tall and had dark olive skin, black thinning hair, and a bushy black mustache that covered his jowly face. Given to outbursts of quick temper, he was dressed as ever in black from head to toe and bulky work boots. And a moment later, he began arguing vehemently with the most unforgettable character of all: an old hag of a woman who was his mother. I didn't know her name—everyone in the house called her babushka, or 'grandmother'—but she was straight out of a Hollywood movie about gypsies.

She was at most times my warden. And she was by far the angriest woman I've ever encountered in my life. One minute she would be demanding that everyone eat, the next she would be screaming at anyone who was not complying with her rules. 'Coosheet, coosheet,' ('eat! eat!') she would order in a high-pitched squeal that made my ears hurt. She was a small but strong woman, and she had the will of an ox. I often imagined she was probably quite pretty in her youth. She had piercing blue eyes and a vibrant smile, which displayed a full mouth of gold teeth—a dead giveaway that she had some money, as in Russia only the wealthy can afford to sport these 'jewels,' which were a status symbol.

Her one overriding feature, however, was her snarling temper

that could flare at a moment's notice, a quality she clearly had handed down to her son. Together now in the kitchen, they were going at each other as if they expected the sky to fall in. For me, any such dissonance was foreboding. And if I amused myself at times by telling myself one could see the babushka's kind in any gypsy fortune-teller's storefront, the last thing I wanted to do right at this moment was ask her about my future. I was all too sure she knew. During ten days of torture, both physical and psychological, hour upon hour had passed, taunting me to the point of implosion. The single most spine-chilling symbol of those ten days in hell was the nail-encrusted wooden club with which I was frequently beaten or threatened; and it turned my body into a black-and-blue totem pole. It's no exaggeration to say that the dogs in the house were treated more humanely. Indeed, Danny and I had to share the dogs' toilet facilities—the backyard—and we were permitted to use it only when the dogs had finished their business. Other heinous acts that I endured were so degrading and demeaning that I never even told Danny that they had happened.

Now, on this ominous morning, I sensed that the game of torture was over. Whatever it was the people in this house from hell wanted to do to me was going to happen, right now.

Outside, I could hear the tinny squeal of the iron gate opening once again, a sound that had come to send waves of terror up my spine, and the sound of a great commotion, voices shouting in anger, booted feet stomping.

Again, my first reflex was to think of Danny. He had been taken from the house, as he frequently was, around five hours before, and my worst fear kept streaming into my head: Was he dead? Had they killed him? Would I ever see him again? Would I be next?

Looking at Oleg, I plucked up the courage—don't ask me where it came from—to confront him.

'Gdye moi moozh?' ('Where is my husband?') I sputtered, fighting back the temptation to spit in his hideous face.

For a moment, he stared back at me, anger swelling his veins, but just then, two more men came in who had not only been part of the gang of junkyard dogs but had at times seemed to be calling the shots for them. I knew them only as Robert and Kuzin, but I thought I knew exactly who and what they were, by their refined, sophisticated manners and use of subtly nuanced threats.

They bore, in every respect, the earmarks of KGB agents trained in the old order of Soviet tyranny, only to be cast adrift in the new order of uneasy Russian democracy to hook up with low-level underworld elements.

They began engaging Oleg and the babushka in heated, animated conversation. All of them were babbling wildly and shouting for

everyone in the house to come to the foyer area. People began emptying out of various rooms, pulling on their clothes and their boots as they ran, some nearly tripping over each other. All of them had guns tucked into their belts.

Women scrambled not out of the rooms but back into them, where their children were sleeping.

Amid this maelstrom of confusion and chaos, I clutched my suitcase, standing rooted to the floor, knowing not what to do or say or think. But I did know that if this was when I was going to die at the hands of this pack of rats, it would not be on their terms; it would not be with fear in my eyes, begging for my life. Nor would it be with those eyes staring at my captors' faces. It would be in a state of unconsciousness.

Rae gave me the chance to carry out my way of dying. At that moment, she began making motions again at me, bringing her index finger up to her mouth, as if she was saying I shouldn't ask Oleg anything else. Then she directed me to go back up the stairs to get my other suitcase and the bright purple overcoat I had bought expressly for this trip to Russia. Clearly, I was going to be taken somewhere, God only knew where.

I climbed back upstairs to the bedroom, where my handbag lay on the floor next to the bed and the other suitcase. I opened it and took out my makeup case. In one of the inside pockets, tucked out of sight, was a packet of Valium tablets, six in all, each five milligrams, individually encased in tinfoil wrapping. I normally kept the Valium for what I liked to call 'insurance' on airplane flights. I had such a terrible fear of flying that I always told myself that if the plane took a nosedive, I was going to swallow all that Valium so I wouldn't feel the sting of death. Not once had I actually slipped any in my mouth. How ironic was it, then, that the first time I ever had reason to do it I was standing firmly on the ground?

There comes a time in many people's lives when they are utterly convinced that they are staring right into the mouth of death. For me, that time was at hand. I could see no way around it. And so I popped out the Valium and funneled the loose tablets into my pants pocket, then put the makeup case back into the suitcase. Forgetting about my coat, I began to haul the other suitcase out of the room and down the stairs.

I was halfway down the staircase when a thundering herd of booted footsteps burst through the front door, which was knocked off its hinges. A man in a green, dubon-style, army parka was holding a machine gun—which I recognised as what I thought looked like an Uzi—with two hands, a baton hanging from his side. My eyes met his.

Behind him, a dozen of other similarly dressed men carrying Uzis

flooded into the house. They ran around me up the stairs and into rooms, screaming and waving their guns at men, women, and children, who were running all about in panic. Irrationally—the only way my mind could work after ten days of being conditioned to think I would die—I assumed this was a death squad hired by Oleg to kill me.

Indeed, that first soldier was still looking right in my eyes. Seeming not to blink, he moved toward me. With his front foot planted on the bottom step, he lifted his Uzi and pointed it at my stomach. I dropped the suitcase. It fell onto the first step where his foot was. Reflexively, I put my hands out in front of me, expecting to feel a bullet tearing through my body. I wanted to plead, 'No! No! Don't shoot!' but my body refused to move and no sound escaped from my mouth.

I waited, cursing the fact that I couldn't reach for my Valium. Damn, I thought, I should have inhaled them upstairs. I'd feel the full force of a horribly painful death.

I waited, with thoughts racing around in my head about Danny, about my children, about the things I hadn't been able to do in my life.

I waited.

I was ready to die.

In many ways, I believed I already had.

2

MOSCOW, EARLY MORNING JANUARY 16, 1992

THE NOOSE TIGHTENS

On that Wednesday night, the 15th, Danny had been taken from the dacha at about 10pm. He was put into the back seat of a Fiat Tipor. Oleg was at the wheel, and in the back of the car with Danny sat a dark and sullen-eyed gangster named Boris. In the front passenger seat was another of the mongrels, a man for whom Yvonne had personal reasons for despising, a smirking, always-unwashed creature called Sascha, whom the Weinstocks merely called 'the Snake.'

The black car tore down icy, treacherous roads for a good hour until Danny could see brilliantly lit office towers, mosques, and spires rising in the night. He knew he was in Moscow now, in the middle of the city, and the car rolled to a stop on Chekhova Street, in front of where the Weinstocks kept the Moscow office of their lucrative but unregulated—and thus very risky, both economically and personally—Australian-based barter trade business. Oleg and Boris climbed out, leaving Danny alone with the Snake, who lit up a cigarette and rolled down the window a crack to let out a pungent cloud of smoke. Not knowing if he'd been left alone with Sascha so that the murderous clod could kill him and dump his body in the closest underbrush, a shivering Danny pulled his coat collars up and the flaps of his hat down over his ears to shield himself against the minus-20-degree cold.

The Snake then moved into the driver's seat and invited Danny up front. Would this merely make it easier for him to put a bullet in his temple and drive off without delay? Danny's long legs were stiff from the long drive, so he was relieved to get out and stretch them. He then asked if he could relieve himself outside. Sascha readily agreed, and he too got out, whereupon the two men urinated in the snow.

'Do you do this in Australia?' the Snake asked with a laugh in pidgin English.

Danny, not half as amused as the lumbering assassin, replied, 'There's no snow in Australia.'

Both men then returned to the car, sharing the front seat. But the car just sat there, the motor off, the lights doused. Finally, after half an hour in what seemed like an ice box, a black Volga drove up next to them, and a man motioned for Sascha to follow. They weren't going to the Weinstocks' office, after all. Instead, within minutes, they were in front of a dilapidated billiard parlour.

Danny was led inside, past worn pool tables at which there were maybe two or three men who barely looked up. He was taken through a maze of rooms until they came to a back office. Here, around a big table, were some faces Danny had come to recognise from their regular visitations to the dacha. One barked at the parlour's manager, 'Chai pazhalesta'—meaning, 'Tea, please.' After a tray with ten cups was brought out, Danny caught sight of another figure in a long, black overcoat entering the room.

His lip curled in disgust when he recognised the man whom he now knew had betrayed him and Yvonne with lies and sold them out, the man whose tawdry instincts and possible KGB methods of entrapment had led them into an unending nightmare—Grigory Miasnikov, the 'business partner' who had urged the Weinstocks to come to Russia and even arranged the trip for them.

Pulling up a chair across the table from Danny, Grigory spoke, barely above a whisper, 'The money has not arrived.'

For Danny, these words produced a feeling not unlike Yvonne's when the machine gun was pointed at her stomach. It meant time was running out on them to stay alive.

Having taken advantage of the Weinstocks' goodwill and their naiveté, Grigory Miasnikov had wormed his way into the Weinstocks' business affairs as part of a conspiracy carved from diverse Russian underworld factions alloyed for the purpose of squeezing a $1.6 million ransom out of their hides. Although Miasnikov insisted this money was really a 'debt' owed to one of their Russian joint-venture partners based in Vladivostok from a recent deal gone bad, Yvonne and Danny knew better; it was extortion, pure and simple. And their lives depended upon meeting the demand.

The quick-witted Weinstocks had succeeded in buying themselves ten days of life by insisting they had a relative in the United States who could pay the ransom, a pediatrician and former brother-in-law of Danny named Israel, or 'Ian,' Rayman, who with his wife were expatriate Australians living in Wayne, New Jersey, a suburb of Philadelphia. On Wednesday, January 8th, the gang—which also

included two always-well-dressed men who bore all the ominous earmarks of former KGB interrogators—had taken Danny from the dacha to the Chekhova Street office to place a call to Ian Rayman.

'The money must be paid,' Danny told the incredulous Ian. 'We cannot leave until it's received.'

Two more calls had ensued over the following week. The money would be forthcoming, Ian promised, if he was just given time.

And time, it turned out, not only kept the Weinstocks alive; unbeknownst to Yvonne or Danny—and the kidnappers—an astonishing and unprecedented operation was now in motion, joining two countries whose entire existence for nearly half a century was based on stockpiling more nuclear weapons than the other. For the first time, they now worked together toward one goal: saving the lives of two Australian citizens being held captive in Moscow.

The roadblocks to any potential rescue mission had been many. The Weinstocks were not American citizens, and there was no hard proof they had really been kidnapped or were in mortal danger. The FBI had no connections to law enforcement authorities in Russia and no legal standing to direct any sort of rescue operation. The Russian police were known to be corrupt and infested with underworld influences. And hanging over the case was the air of mutual distrust between America and Russia; never before had they worked hand in hand in a criminal investigation, and mutual, arched eyebrows and age-old suspicions still abounded.

To crack the case and save the couple, historical conventions and a tangled tapestry of international jurisdictions had to be bypassed, precedents shattered. Yet for too long, that was a faint hope; though a small circle of diplomatic and law enforcement officials—led by a hard-bitten FBI man and an ambitious and vainglorious Russian police colonel who both worked tirelessly to end the crisis, a logjam of bureaucratic inertia which ate up critical hours of the clock.

The missing link fell into place when a precocious and egocentric twenty-three-year-old Russian lawyer living temporarily in Philadelphia became immersed in the case, upstaging the bureaucrats by accomplishing what they could not or would not do. That is when the rescue operation moved off square one, in turn bringing belated vows of cooperation between American and Russian intelligence agencies.

By now, fibres of a noose had been woven, and the noose was closing around the kidnappers. But would it close fast enough?

At the billiard hall, Danny again pleaded to be allowed just one more call to Ian Rayman.

'Nyet,' he was told, 'no more phone calls.'

And then he heard words that sounded more sinister than any

other words he had ever heard in his life.

'Tomorrow, we will take you to Vladivostok.'

His body coiled. If he were to be taken to Vladivostok—thousands of miles away on Russia's southeast edge, cheek by jowl with Siberia, that most infamous Russian wasteland—he knew he would never see Yvonne again. He would die there, without a trace.

Morning would be breaking soon in Moscow. By then, he knew, it would be too late.

3

PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

In strict terms, I went to Russia on a business trip. If truth be told, however, I never would have made that perilous journey simply because there was money to be made. Certainly, dying wasn't supposed to be in the script, but the seeds of such a journey were laid long before I had the faintest idea what business meant. When I look back into my past, for as far as I can see, I was always taking risks. I must have been born with a gene that made my pulse quicken when there was an element of danger involved in something, in anything, I did.

I'm just as sure that that gene must have been handed down to me, since the limbs of my family tree are ripe with an adventurous spirit. My grandparents, on both sides, were swept up in the great immigration wave of the early 1900s, but instead of getting on the well-travelled boat routes to America, they cast their fate south to Australia. My father's ancestors lived in a Russian hamlet called Vitepsk, my mother's in Palestine, in a tiny town called Rosh Pina, in what is now Israel. Many Jews did, in fact, immigrate to Australia, but most waited to get off at the second port of call, the cosmopolitan treasure trove of Melbourne. The more adventurous jumped off at the first port, Perth, the more prosaic and challenging capital of Western Australia. My grandparents were among the latter. Knowing what I do of them, they probably got tired of being penned up.

Though I cannot quite remember, I'm sure I strained to get out of the womb decades later, ready to come out kicking, impatient to get my feet on the ground. On October 20, 1955, at King Edward Memorial Hospital in Perth, they couldn't hold me back any longer. I became the third daughter of Billie and Wally Shilkin.

They say the best revenge is living well, and we did. We lived in a beach town in Perth called Floreat Park, where there were few Jews and a rumbling of anti-Semitism. When my sister Erica and I went to the Floreat Park Primary School—the only two Jewish kids in the place—they had a religion class, which really meant 'Christian class' because that's the religion that was taught. We didn't want to go into that classroom, so we would sit in the hallway while the other kids pelted us with insults, calling us 'Jewfish,' among other things.

My grandmother had helped build our house years before, and it

was one of the first homes put up in Floreat Park. We were quite comfortable living the middle-to-upper-class lifestyle. My father worked for forty-five years for the same company as manager of an electrical supply store. In the summertime, every other school vacation, and almost every weekend, my parents would allow me to go to a farm inland in Western Australia. Why they did this I never knew, since we lived near the beach and it was actually hotter and more stifling on the farm, which was owned by a friend's dad named Mr Collard. The farm was in a country town called Gin Gin and offered precious few attractions for overactive kids. Mr Collard had a daughter about my age named Marilyn. We were close school friends, and we would become so bored and so desperately in need of a swim that we'd ride our bikes to a filthy creek to take a dip.

Even that was a risk, since the pond was full of hungry leeches. We didn't care. We'd flick them off of us and keep swimming. We'd also do things like send Marilyn's puppy, an Australian Blue Heeler named Digit, into the scrub, or bush, to encourage the big red kangaroos to come out and chase us. This isn't as innocuous as it sounds. Some of those big reds grew to nine feet tall, one swoosh of their tails could kill you instantly. Marilyn and I would have competitions to see who could run the fastest away from them!

We played 'Survivor' before the concept became a TV show, pretending to be Aborigines digging for food. A prize find was a witchity grub. The insides of these big white caterpillars consisted of live, wriggling maggots. For us, that was bon apetit. Other times, Marilyn's rotten little brother, Ross, would be my foil. He liked to throw rocks at my head for fun, and one time, knocked me unconscious. When I came to, I told Mr Collard. He looked at me for a second, then said, 'Why isn't dinner on the table?'

With that kind of empathy, Mr Collard readily agreed to let me take the wheel of his big Land Rover one day when I was twelve. I did pretty well, maneuvering on a dusty country road like I owned it. Then he said, 'I'll take it now.' I didn't know how to work the clutch or how hard to hit the brake, and the Rover crashed into a ditch. Miraculously, we weren't hurt, though I crawled out from the wreckage shaking like a leaf. But I was aglow, too, because I'd driven a car!

Like me, my mother could hardly sit still. When she was eighteen, she walked into ABC radio studios in Perth, told the station manager she wanted an acting job and demanded an audition on the spot. That won her a job in a radio play for five pounds. Soon after, she was given her own show—an exercise program for pregnant women—and later performed on the stage.

I was not far behind. At twelve, I had taught myself the guitar,

and I could play forty songs and sing them in an unusually deep voice for a female, though my speaking voice is normally high-pitched. If you don't know me, hearing me sing you'd think I was a black soul singer—something that was fairly radical in Australia. At fourteen, I entered a talent competition on a TV show called Spotlight. I sang and played the Cat Stevens song 'Sad Lisa' and took first prize.

Then, at seventeen, I entered the New Faces competition, a TV talent show which had sent on to stardom Olivia Newton John, among others. The competition played out for over a year, but I got to the final round, where I sang and played 'The Windmills of Your Mind' in front of a big, lush orchestra. When I sing, I get very emotional, and when the flute began to play, it was so beautiful that I nearly came to tears. I guess the judges were touched by that because when they voted, I was the one left standing.

So, now I heard the calling. I would be a big star. With my $500 in prize money and an expenses-paid trip to Sydney, I waited for a big recording contract. Everyone, it seemed, was promising me one. A New Faces judge was a TV personality named Stuart Wagstaff. He had an office in Sydney and invited me up. 'We're going to make a star out of you,' he told me. I loved Stuart, but I'm still waiting for him to come through. After I went back to Perth, nothing happened.

Not that I didn't give it my best shot. A few years later, after I had moved to Melbourne, I, at my own expense, cut several demo records, in a kind of funky Motown style. One was a raunchy tune called 'Emergency Love,' which was written and produced by a very talented guy named John St. Peters. John arranged a record deal for me, a big deal that would have my records distributed by Polygram.

Everything was ready to go. We had a release date and plans to record an album. We were all giddy, and one night a bunch of us went to a nightclub called Billboard. One of the men in the party was a record-company executive, who at one point backed me into a dark corner and began rubbing his body against mine. Drunk and slurring his words, he mumbled, 'Sleep with me, Yvonne.'

I was completely shocked and disgusted. Recoiling from him as quickly as I could, I said, politely but firmly, 'No way.'

He turned vindictive.

'If you don't, the deal is off.'

I didn't know if he was being serious or just issuing an empty threat. I was in business—and I was about life. This was one course in which I was not going to get an 'A'. I'd been clear, and the guy backed off. I hoped that would be the end of it.

And it was the end of it—my music career, that is. The next day, I was informed that the deal was indeed off. And in the coming weeks, I found that I had been blacklisted all over Melbourne. I went to every

record company I could find looking for a deal, only to be told, ‘We’ve got too much on our plate,’ and other such nonsense.

So that was the end of my illustrious singing career. It was a pity, too. I have convinced myself I could have gone where no woman had in show business—a white, Australian Aretha Franklin. That dream dashed, I turned to other, more fundamental matters, such as home, family, and going where no woman had gone before in a very different—and very dangerous—business. Most everything I would do from then on, in fact, would require some form of risk-taking and prepare me to survive horrific events.

4

MELBOURNE, 1975–1990

What brought me cross-country to Melbourne wasn't music. It was love. In the summer of 1975, I was at a barbecue in Perth when I met a man named Avi Samuel, who had lived a fascinating life.

Born in Libya, he had lived in Israel until 1965, when he immigrated to the east coast of Australia. He was a dark, swarthy, charming man, short of stature but long on the work ethic. Laboring sixteen hours a day, he had amassed a small fortune by carving a niche for himself by doing business with India. On his first business trip there, he had bought stacks of women's plastic bracelets, which he sold to department stores in Australia. That began an India-Australia commercial lane through which he imported clothing and other goods. He invested the profits wisely in the stock markets.

At thirty-one, he was twelve years older than I, but I found him smart and suave, with a conniving side that intrigued me—in other words, someone who could nourish me and my own ambitions. Clearly, he found something intriguing about me, because he fell madly in love, and even after he went back home to Melbourne, he began pushing hard for me to visit him. As it happened, I was going to be in Melbourne over the Christmas holiday to visit my oldest sister, Jan, and her husband, Colin, who lived there. So I said yes. A few weeks later, he proposed to me. Sudden as it was, I felt compelled to say yes. I believed I'd fallen madly in love with him. When I went home to Perth, I began packing to move to Melbourne. I also told my parents, whom Avi flew back to Perth to meet.

As soon as his plane landed, Billie, Wally and I greeted him at the airport. They took one look at him and seemed less than ecstatic, sensing something smarmy and threatening. Later, my mother took me aside.

'Yvonne,' she said, 'do not marry this man.'

Me being me, however, I didn't listen. I was ambitious and stubborn, and Avi seemed to be a perfect match. Within a month, Jan had organised the wedding, which took place on March 22, 1976, at the Toorak Synagogue. It may have been an omen that at the reception I stood too close to a candelabra and my wedding veil caught fire. For one year, we had a relatively calm and loving relationship. In March 1977, almost one year to the day after we

married, came the blessed birth of our daughter, Romy. That's when the marriage seemed to go up in smoke.

It was as if Avi grew jealous of that beautiful little girl for taking my attention from him. For him—as for many Israeli men—love wasn't an emotion; it was a possession, something of finite value that couldn't be divvied up between people, even for someone of his own blood. Rather than dealing with his pathological sickness, he began to lash out at me—literally. The hands that once held me lovingly became weapons, flailing in anger and frustration.

One of the most common, yet least understandable of human foibles is women staying in abusive relationships. I was no different. I wanted more than anything else in the world to believe love was always salvageable if it was real, and that Avi wouldn't have treated me that way unless he loved me. I even found ways to blame myself—maybe I pushed him to it. Because I was so much younger and had my own worldly curiosities, maybe I couldn't be what he wanted me to be.

Avi no doubt sensed this when I asked to come with him on his business trips to India. He had always been a lone wolf on those treks, on which he could fancy himself the macho world traveller. And I could see how he could feel that way, because it was an exhilarating experience, one not incidentally fraught with danger, which only seemed to whet my appetite.

On one trip, for example, we were in a car with Romy and two friends, Vinod and Vina Chopra, on our way to Agra to visit the Taj Mahal. We were cruising through a small town when suddenly a teenage boy came out of nowhere and hurled himself against the front of the car, hoping to be struck—something poor kids in India do routinely. They're great stuntmen, knowing how to maneuver themselves to get hit lightly and go down in a heap as if they were killed. They then struggle to their feet and limp around crying, and the driver is so relieved he'll slip the kid money to forget the whole thing.

We were not about to be scammed, and within minutes, the car was surrounded by about three hundred people from the town, who began banging their fists on the hood and rocking it back and forth like a toy. We were petrified. Vinod, thinking quickly, grabbed a first-aid kit from the glove box and somehow managed to get out of the driver's side door. He threw the kit into the mob along with approximately a hundred dollars. When the crowd dispersed to pluck up the money, Vinod jumped back in, floored the gas pedal, and drove us safely away.

Avi and I owed Vinod our lives, though there is a very sad postscript to that story. Some years later, this brave man faced a

terrible tragedy when his sixteen-year-old son, Vikram, died of a brain hemorrhage. Vinod and Vina were devastated.

Avi came to believe my place was strictly in the kitchen and the bedroom. The problem was, he did not ease off his own business trips. Romy and I saw less and less of him. He would be gone for up to eight months out of the year, leaving us alone and usually without enough money for me to buy food or pay the gas and electric bills. I believe he did this intentionally, to keep me in my place. By now, though, the abuse and the absences made it a marriage in name only. I plucked up the courage to take Romy and move to a nearby apartment, which must have seemed like the ultimate insult to Avi.

Romy was just starting kindergarten around this time, yet he still would leave us high and dry. I had to apply for a separated-wives pension, which, even though was very little money, it kept Romy and me fed. Her paternal grandparents were still in Israel at the time, so I asked my parents for some monetary help, though out of some form of guilt and shame, I could not tell them about the details of why the marriage had fallen apart.

Through all this, Avi would not let go of me as a possession. He was always trying to get me to come home, albeit in some rather bizarre ways. One night, he came to the apartment, and I swear I thought he was going to kill me. He bashed in the door like a raging bull, and he was delirious. He grabbed me by the throat and hurled me against a wall, nearly choking the life from me. His gaze was fixated on a gold bracelet that his mother had given me, and he tried yanking it off my wrist, not stopping even after my forearm began to bleed from the metal clasp digging into it. Not knowing what to do, I took the bracelet off and threw it out the open door. When he went to look for it, I slammed the door and called the police—not for the first time. And not for the first time, they did nothing. The drama ended when Avi couldn't find the bracelet in the dark and, in a complete personality turnaround, knocked on the door and said softly, almost like a child, 'I can't find it,' then trailed away into the night.

At a different time, Avi had organised two men to come to my apartment to practically tear my car to pieces. They put sugar in the petrol tank, smashed the carburetor, and pulled the seats out. I knew Avi was behind it, though I couldn't prove it. For one thing, he was less than surprised about the incident, and even though I had no car to drive Romy to school for days, he seemed not to care one whit. In his mind, I was convinced; this campaign of violence and threats was all part of a plan that would eventually get me to come back home.

Finally, he knew there was not going to be a reconciliation. In 1981, he agreed to a divorce and gave me a very stingy settlement—though he made me go through hell to get it out of him. While he was

ordered by the court to pay me a lump sum, he pleaded poverty on the matter of child support and was allowed to pay the least possible amount. I had just enough to buy a small house—which I nearly lost when Avi conveniently disappeared to England when I needed the settlement money to close on the house—and some furniture. I would hear little of or from him over the ensuing years. And yet, in October 2002, when I was notified that he had died of cancer, I felt an ache in my soul. Mostly, I ached for Romy, whom I had tried to shield from the bad events of the marriage. She hurts because he's gone. I hurt because he never knew how much he was hurting her, though, gladly, he did make a genuine effort to get closer to Romy after the divorce and treasured her until the day he died. For that, I was proud of him.

On my own, I tried to revive the dormant music career that had eluded me at age eighteen. I took a job at Mushroom Records in Melbourne as a personal assistant to the top executive there. I had seamlessly fit back into the music scene and even got up enough nerve to market my demo tapes to people in the music industry. Then, of course, came that deal with Polygram—and the horrific incident at the Billboard Club that put me back in my place again.

Fortunately, I was able to get to my feet again after my divorce and quickly find another man. And what a man!

Meeting him was the work of the father of one of Romy's kindergarten mates, who invited me to his New Year's Eve party. A few days after, he saw me at school picking up Romy and told me there was a guy at the party who was anxious to go out with me. Reluctantly, I agreed to meet him. At my door appeared a tall, elegantly handsome, bespectacled man carrying red roses. His name was George Jozef, and from his first smile I was hooked on him, and he on me.

George, whose roots were Romanian Jewish, was young but seasoned at age thirty-four. Like me, he was recovering from a marriage that ended in ashes—his wife had tragically died of cancer at twenty-eight, leaving a four-year-old son and an eighteen-month-old daughter. Unlike me, he was well to do, the owner of Ultimo Menswear, and had six retail shops in and around Melbourne. He lived opulently in a sprawling, three-level, million-dollar home in a molto affluent section of Toorak.

Things moved fast for us. Within three months, he asked me to marry him. I agreed, and we planned a honeymoon in Hong Kong. We left the date open, and Romy and I moved into his house in April of

1982—though not 'officially.' I still kept my apartment. For all intents and purposes, we were a married couple, very much in love.

Then came the night of May 14.

It was a Friday, the end of the work week, when George would take all of the money from the safe in his office and bring it home and keep it there until he could get to the bank on Monday. On those nights, I would usually hire a babysitter and drive to the office, and we would go out to dinner. I would also harangue him for carrying all that cash with him, telling him that he should keep it in the safe. He would just laugh. 'Who's going to rob me?' he would say.

On this Friday night, however, the babysitter couldn't come over, so I stayed home with George's kids—by an act of providence, Romy was staying with her father that weekend. And because I was to be at home, I wanted to do something different, something that would surprise him. George always had a rule when it came to the kitchen: It was not to be used in any grand manner for cooking; mainly, it was for show, just to say we had a beautiful kitchen. That night, though, I decided to cook him a sumptuous Shabbas dinner. I had lit the oven when the phone rang. It was George, on his last stop before coming home. He asked me if I needed anything. I smiled to myself, knowing the surprise that awaited him.

'Only some orange juice,' I said with a little giggle.

That was at around 8pm, and he said he would be coming right home. An hour later, I heard the sound of his Mercedes turn into the driveway, as I always could because of the vroom of the turbo engine. After a few minutes, he still hadn't come through the door. I thought he may have stopped at the bottom of the driveway to check the mailbox. I was then jolted by the sound of a loud boom.

It was as if somebody had thrown bricks at the front door. Instinctively, I panicked. I was on the top floor, in our bedroom, and I ran to the window overlooking the driveway. I could see right down to the garage. The Mercedes was parked just outside of it, next to my car. The interior light was on. The driver's door was open. Nobody was inside.

I knew in my gut that something bad had happened, but what I didn't know. Just then, my eyes caught sight of three figures sprinting down the driveway and out into the well-lit street.

I felt my feet carrying me down the stairs and out through the back door to the driveway. As soon as I hit the asphalt, I saw George crumpled on the ground. He was lying in a gathering pool of blood that was streaming down the driveway. His body was full of holes. He was lifeless. His eyes stared vacantly ahead.

I dropped to my knees and began to shake him. 'George! George!' I wailed, my words echoing in the still night.

Hearing and feeling nothing, I somehow managed to get to my feet and ran back upstairs, where I dialed the police and blurted out to an operator what had happened. She told me not to go back downstairs in case someone was watching for me, so I cowered in the corner of the bedroom until I heard police sirens outside and fists pounding on the door with voices saying they were cops. I shakily went downstairs to let them in, whereupon officers began roaming through the house. Without one word of comfort, plainclothes detectives began questioning me.

Through all this drama, George's kids remained asleep, and when I would periodically look in on them, a policewoman followed me, her brows furrowed as if she believed I needed to be watched closely. Indeed, and shockingly to me, it seemed that the cops were suspicious of me. In the kitchen, they began to grill me, peppering me with rapid-fire questions such as whether George had any enemies, whether he was involved in anything shady, and so on until I could hardly think straight.

I was so numb with shock and fear that during this questioning I realised they had told me nothing about George. I banged my fist on the counter.

'I'm not going to say one more word,' I yelled, 'until you tell me if George is dead or not!'

A detective looked up calmly from his notebook. 'Yes, ma'am, he is, unfortunately,' he said. I wanted to cry, but I was too disoriented, too numb. All I could think to ask was whether he had died instantly. They said he did. In some very small way, I was relieved to hear that.

The detectives then returned to grilling me, focusing on what my motives might have been if I had killed George. By then, they had done a record search and seen the complaints I had lodged against Avi over the years. And in fact, Avi had still been making trouble for me recently. Even after we had split, he would call George's house and yowl about not wanting his 'wife' being there. George would roll his eyes and hang up.

But, now, the police had formed a theory: that I killed George to make it look like Avi had done it so that he would be put away. As absurd as the theory was, at about 3am the next morning, before George's body was cold, the police went to see Avi.

After four hours of questioning, the cops finally asked me if I wanted to call anyone. I then called one of George's closest friends, who listened incredulously as I told him about George's violent death. He rushed right over and pulled into the driveway as a police forensic team was sniffing around. He practically had to step over George's body—which still lay where it fell, covered by a sheet, only his shoes visible.

Later that morning, they took his body to the morgue. I had to go there to identify it, though I could barely recognise who it was. Lying on a slab, this once handsome man was now bloated, his skin purple. I nearly crumbled from the shock.

As daylight filled the sky, I went back to the house, where the mother of George's first wife had come to stay with the kids. They were never really told the truth about what befell their father until years later; up until then, they were merely told he'd had an accident. I knew I could not bear to stay there, so I went to stay with a friend. When Romy returned after the weekend, we moved back to our old apartment. For the next few weeks, I sat on my bed, my legs curled under me, and cried all day long. Often I would awaken in the middle of the night, sweat bathing my face, calling out for George. To this day, the pain lingers. It always will.

George's family had arranged for a funeral. Yet because the police would not release the body for three days, he was not buried the next day, as is customary under Jewish canon. Instead, they held him in the morgue so they could perform an autopsy, which is also barred by Jewish law. No one within the police department seemed to care very much about our traditions. Finally, George was laid to rest. Watching his casket being lowered into the ground, I couldn't help but think that my life had ended as well.

Finally, after three interminable months, George's killers were tracked down. That's when all the pieces of the puzzle fell together. George, it was revealed, had been stalked for some time before that night in a plot rigged by one of his employees who knew George carried a lot of cash with him on Friday nights. The three men I had seen running down the street had, several times, waited underneath our house, in a wine cellar, for George to arrive home. However, because we had usually been to dinner, we had often come home late, and the trio gave up and left before we got home.

On the fateful Friday, George had come home alone, earlier than usual, and they struck, forcing him out of the car. One of the men pointed a double-barreled sawn-off shotgun at him. Trying to be a martyr, George reached for the gun; it went off, spraying buckshot all over his body. The killers ran away, empty-handed.

For their bloody deed, the gang of three was convicted of manslaughter, yet they were sentenced to a mere four years—because, astonishingly, they had no previous criminal records and were set free inside two years. The employee who had organised the robbery walked away a free man. Never did any of them show any remorse.

The trial only added humiliation to my pain. At one point, I was put on the stand and asked to locate the house on a map when the judge said with a sneer, 'It's not going to do much good, anyway,

because women don't know how to read maps.' Again, as I am prone to do, I blamed myself for the tragedy. If I had just gone to be with him, as usual, on that night, we would have come home late, and the killers wouldn't have waited. If they had confronted both of us, maybe I could have somehow fought them off, altered their plans, done something, anything. Self-incrimination, I have found, never really goes away.

Still, once more I tried to put another body blow behind me and return to a normal life, but it struck me that normalcy might well be an impossibility. I began to think that I didn't need to go looking for danger—it seemed that danger came looking for me. What I didn't know was that the real danger lay just ahead on the next road.

5

MELBOURNE, 1983–1989

The nights were especially long following George's death. Getting through those interminably sleepless hours meant a lot of introspection about where I had been and where I was going. Although I had the joy of my life in my daughter, Romy, everything else had gone wrong for me. I wasn't even thirty, and I'd been burned by divorce, the death of a loved one, and the dashing of a music career.

Indeed, for all my restive ambition, I had no formal university education and couldn't imagine what kind of career I might forge. Taking account of all these cons, and seeing so few pros, introspection soon morphed into alienation. At times, I felt myself sinking into a shaft of hopelessness.

In retrospect, that I held together and did not remain closed off was due in no small part to the selfless friendship of a wonderful woman named Rhonda Kohn, whose daughter Natalie went to school with Romy. Rhonda was the closest thing I had to a girlfriend. For some reason, I got along fine with men, but women seemed to find me a bit intimidating. I heard myself called a 'tough cookie,' or worse, more than I liked. Yet Rhonda saw through my sometimes-willful exterior attitude to the scared little girl underneath.

During my marriage to Avi, and more so after I'd left him, Rhonda saw that what I needed most of all was a true friend. She was more than that. She was my ballast. Whenever she saw that far-off look in my eyes, she brought me back. Never did she lecture me to stop wallowing in self-pity. Instead, she merely made me a part of life again, able to enjoy the simple things that are the most rewarding.

This usually took the form of her bringing over Natalie to play with Romy. The two little girls would sit themselves down at the dining room table pretending their storybooks were menus. They would tell me to play waitress and take their 'orders,' which could be 'elephant soup' or 'horse's legs.' Something as purely innocent as that would redirect my emotions.

At more serious moments, Rhonda would sit with me for hours, reassuring me after George's death that I was not to blame. She would not leave if she thought I'd backslide. It's now three decades since we met and hers is still the best shoulder on which I can lean.

Still, the essence of survival lies inside of us. The strength is there to overcome any obstacle, but only if we tap into our reserves of grit, pluck, desire, whatever it is. I found that I could kick myself in the behind much harder in times of adversity than success.

So I pulled myself out of bed and dared myself to get back to taking risks.

On a small scale to be sure, but still taking a risk, I borrowed money using my house as collateral and purchased a couple of small rundown houses. I renovated them and put them up for sale. Neck-deep in debt, I was able to sell them and turn a nice little profit. At least financially, I was again standing on my feet.

As for meeting another man, that would take more than an order of horse's legs and grit. It took time just to even consider dating again. My mindset was, why be burned again? It stayed set for four years—not that I was celibate. To be sure, I wasn't emulating Mother Teresa. I dated a few guys, but never would have let myself fall head over heels.

In 1986, another friend kept pushing me to meet a guy. Jewish, a recent widower. A hunk, she said. Although I did think a mutual rebounding from tragedy was an inducement, it took another few weeks for me to give in to a blind date. I arranged for him to come to my house for coffee, and in walked an alarmingly huge fellow, six foot four, two hundred pounds, his face obscured by oversized horn-rimmed glasses and a very long beard. Oh, great, I thought, I'm being fixed up with Rasputin.

His name was Daniel Weinstock. At thirty-eight, he was seven years older than me. I learned he was a successful businessman, a computer software programmer specialising in fleet management transport. His company, National Computer Services, wrote the software that allowed big businesses to coordinate transportation across Australia. His wife, Freda, died of cancer barely three months before, leaving two sons, ages ten and six, and he was looking to quickly remarry.

I learned all this because, sitting in a chair in my living room for four hours, all he did was talk about himself. I could have been a piece of furniture. Not that he wasn't intriguing, or attractive if you could see through the beard, but it was all about him. When he left, I told myself that if I ever saw this Mr Weinstock again, it would be much too soon. Things are never that cut and dried in matters of the heart. Danny was taking his two boys, Ben and Jonathan, away on vacation the following week, and I was surprised when he called me from the little hick town where they were staying. He was a totally different Mr Weinstock. Apparently not feeling the need to impress me, he seemed genuinely interested in me. A couple of days later, he

sent me an unbelievably romantic love letter followed the next day by a dozen long-stemmed red roses.

Of course, George had won me with roses, and I reacted the same way this time. When Danny arrived back, with his beard shorn and displaying the handsome features I'd imagined, we became an item. He became obsessed with marrying me. While I didn't think I could love him the way I had George, he wore down my resistance to falling in love again. I was able to rebuff two proposals, but when he took me to a restaurant and actually kneeled down in front of me in the middle of a full dining room, I said yes. I had but one condition.

'Danny, I'll marry you,' I said, 'but only if you get up because I'm dying of embarrassment.'

A huge cheer arose from the patrons in the restaurant.

He gave me a ring that night and asked me to move into his house pending our marriage. The house, in a beachside suburb called Brighton, was splendid enough, a bit old and run down but comfortable nonetheless. Danny had worked hard to establish a good home, and the house stood as a testament to his success. But it had something I could not live with—a ghost. Call me melodramatic, but the first time I set foot in the place, I felt the spirit of his late wife, Freda, in every room. Danny suggested renovating it but I reiterated my unease. I didn't want to be ungrateful, but I simply didn't want to share my house with another Mrs Weinstock.

So we decided this was the time for both of us to make a new beginning. Danny put the house up for sale, and I put some of my own money into buying a spanking-new five-bedroom home in another suburb, Elsternwick. We moved in just after the new year of 1987, and on March 28, we tied the knot at the South Caulfield Synagogue before eighty guests, including my parents Billie and Wally who came in from Perth, soon to move to Melbourne themselves. What I recall most clearly about that day, other than how hot and stifling it was in that synagogue, was the way Danny's eyes lit up when I strode in wearing a vintage Charleston lace dress and apricot-colored sash. I did, however, nearly turn solemnity into slapstick comedy when the heat got me under the chupa and I nearly fainted dead away.

We partied and danced the hora until the wee hours at a nearby restaurant called Goldman's, then honeymooned at Surfer's Paradise in Queensland. When we came back home, Danny and I palpably believed we had nothing but good fortune waiting for us in the future.

For me, a new life meant two things, which both of us wanted. First was me getting pregnant. Second was me working with him in business. I felt this was a perfect mix of our life's interests. I wanted another child, but I had no intention of being an old-fashioned housebound mum. Danny was an extremely astute businessman,

having prefigured the coming tidal wave of computer-related industries in the early and mid-1980s. Under his steady hand, National Computer Services had developed into a profitable, if not enormously lucrative concern. In me, he understood that he had a savvy and strong woman eager to learn.

Danny began teaching me the ropes of the business and said I was the best student he had ever had. Soon, I was writing those tricky software programs, and by the end of 1987 I elevated myself to the position of co-director with him. The money was steady and rewarding. But we both wanted more. Much more.

I think Danny got from me a sense of business wanderlust. This was a logical extension of my risk-taking impulses. I told him we could stand pat and make a nice living, or we could push the boundaries and perhaps break the bank. And so we began looking around at high-risk capital ventures.

As it happened, Danny and I didn't have to put in any legwork to expand the Weinstock brand name onto a global stage. The vehicle for doing that literally walked right into our office.

In the winter of 1988, a mysterious and nervy stranger named Matthew Hurd ambled unannounced through the door of National Computer Services and began pitching a 'can't-miss' business proposition. Normally, we would have been wary of someone coming in off the street like this, figuring he was either a huckster or a leech. However, I became intrigued with the guy's chutzpah and with his spiel about the lucrative potential of something called barter trade.

An Australian with strong community ties, Hurd was forty-eight, short and stumpy, and though he fairly burned with ambition and ideas, he had a soothing, unassuming manner that went a long way towards easing our minds about this murky business. Matthew seemed eminently credible. He explained that he had gone to Moscow during the 1980 Olympics and had seen how some daring Western businessmen had made a fortune doing business with Iron Curtain and Third World countries.

The game, as Matthew explained it, worked like an endless carousel ride that began and ended in Russia, where quality consumer goods are so meager that black-market merchants would be willing and able to pillage the country's natural resources to get their hands on them. That set off a chain reaction of movement. Other countries, large and small, industrial or Third World, Asian or East European, craved those resources—items like copper, tin, aluminium, steel, even

fertiliser—and they would buy those Russian goods, sight-unseen, for obscene amounts of money. And we, as the barter trade agents, would make a killing.

What would the Russians want from these deals? Here's the beautiful part. They wanted not one cent. All they wanted were those hard-to-come-by goods—basic essentials such as shoes, clothing, and food; high-tech electronics items like computers and peripherals, televisions, stereos, and copying machines; and sturdy vehicles like automobiles and trucks. With the money we would rake in from the sale of their goods, we'd buy these items wholesale in the Western parts of the world and drop-ship them back to our partners in Russia. The amount of money that accrued from these global deals could stretch into the millions, Matthew said, if one had the stomach to pursue it, not merely half-heartedly but with a commitment to people who knew the game inside out. People like him, for one.

'Put yourself in my hands,' he said, 'and it'll be like writing whatever number you want on a blank cheque.' It was a statement that would, in time, prove to be wickedly ironic.

Our first question was whether such trading with Iron Curtain countries was entirely legal. As Matthew explained it, the answer was yes, no, and maybe. Within the Soviet Union, it was perfectly legal, then and now. However, in the West, barter trade lies in a gray area, caught in a bind between free trade and private profiteering, the latter of which is acceptable only if the goods being marketed can in any way be construed as having any non-military use—including weapons or high-tech items such as encryption devices and some software applications. In Australia, for instance, such commerce in the late 1980s was enjoined by the Coordinating Committee on Multilateral Export Controls (COCOM), which was based in Paris and had been used for over a decade as a US tool to prevent worldwide distribution of encryption.

(COCOM was officially dissolved in 1994, but many of the rules today remain intact under the Wassenaar [The Hague] Arrangement on Export Controls for Conventional Arms and Dual-Use Goods and Technologies.) In fact, as you will see, Danny and I would run afoul of COCOM, nearly ruining one particularly lucrative deal.

Moreover, Western governments for political and propagandistic reasons implicitly frowned upon carrying on freelance commerce with the Iron Curtain countries. Those concerns, however, hardly resonated with capitalism-driven Western businessmen. Far more important, barter trade was not a business for the faint of heart. For one thing, because it was done in the shadows, unregulated by any national or international trade agency, agreements and contracts were only as good as the word of your trading partners—who, working within a

tapestry of subcontracted middlemen, you rarely ever saw and who worked exclusively on handshake deals. You had to hope no one turned out to be a crook looking to rip you off or, worse, try to hold you up. If they did, deals could collapse, and hundreds of thousands of dollars could be lost.

In business terms, it doesn't get any riskier than that.

Even so, the risk was well worth it, and has been since the earliest expeditions to Asia by Portuguese ships in the early 1500s, trading opium to the Chinese for silks. All kinds of fortunes were made when an ensuing opium-smoking plague swept through Asia. In modern times, it wasn't opium that stoked the barter trader game, but rather things that are taken completely for granted in the West. You can get the idea by recalling the constant toilet-paper shortages in the Soviet Union, which on the black market was like solid gold on a roll.

Make no mistake. There were plenty of capitalists behind the Iron Curtain, and they took no chances in beating out the competition. Most black-market businessmen were aided and abetted by the Russian Mafia—which is not quite like the Sicilian Mafia, at least not before the fall of Communism. In the old Soviet Union, ironically enough given the ham-fisted ways of the Communist regimes, the Mafia wasn't absorbed with beating or murdering people. It was all about business, the expediting of deals.

Having these kinds of 'business partners' would not, Danny and I knew, win us any awards from the Australian Chamber of Commerce. But it might win us the dolce vita we wanted. For a woman in particular, this was an unlikely career choice, to say the least. Very few women were involved in barter trade, which scared away numerous macho men as well. But for me and Danny, it was a no-brainer. We liked the scent of international wheeling and dealing. We liked the scent of danger, too, though we could hardly imagine a scenario whereby we would be in any great physical danger and had not heard of any barter trade merchant's body washing up ashore lately. Most of all, we loved the scent of money.

And so we moved fast, very fast. Anticipating a hydra-headed empire, we moved into a plush, 8000-square-foot office on Claremont Street in the South Yarra business district, which would now house both National Computer Services and the still-forming new business, which we named Video Technology Ltd.

In getting Video Technology off the ground, we gave the big-talking Matthew Hurd free reign, as he had proven he had considerable and reliable business contacts in the Soviet Union.

'You two just sit back; let me handle everything on the Russian side,' he told us, cocky to no end.

And he did. While Danny and I concentrated on National

Computer Services matters, Matthew drew up contracts and put together joint ventures with parties all around Russia. With a Russian confidante named Grigory Miasnikov, he quickly created four of these joint ventures we could partner up with, all based in Moscow. The first, of which Miasnikov was general director, was called SovAustralTechnicka, so named because in exchange for scoring up the resource goods, we would deliver to it electronic and computer goods.

For a while, we were kept at a distance from Grigory, hearing of him only from Matthew. We wanted no particular social relationship with the Russians, merely a business one. All we really cared about was that men like this could make us money, big money. Grigory, we were told, was valuable because in Moscow's underground circles he was known to be a 'fixer,'—that is, he could make good things happen and problems go away. How he did it, I told myself, was his affair, and his alone.

That went for the bribes, too. Grigory, Matthew assured us, would take care of them from his own pocket, not ours. Only later did it become abundantly clear that we should have asked more questions about Grigory Miasnikov and Matthew Hurd.

By mid-1988, the business had gotten up and running. Our first deal routed Russian fertiliser to China for around $30,000, hardly a huge amount but one that whetted our appetites for more. We had about twenty people, a mix of Russians and Chinese, working in the Claremont Street office, putting together lists of goods that Miasnikov would send. By 1989, Video Technology had netted upwards of $130,000. We still had National Computer Services, and that was still a successful concern, but we began giving it less of our time.

It was as if a business had sprouted out of the ground without us having to do much of anything, and almost out of a sense of guilt about that, we repaid the efficacious Matthew by giving him a nominal salary of $40,000. More rewardingly, we named him co-director with us in Video Technology—which was extraordinarily generous of us, given that it's customary for directors of any company to kick in equal shares of money. The amount of equity that Matthew had paid for in Video Technology was exactly zero, but whenever it struck Danny and I that perhaps we should have made him put his money where his braggadocio was, he would rig another deal and make us forget the thought.

A typical deal would work like this: Grigory would put together

his lists of desired items. He would make his own deal to scrounge up the natural-resource goods, and we would pre-sell them to China, to either of the Koreas, to the Eastern bloc, just about anywhere. The goods would be bundled in containers or stowed in the hull of a ship docked somewhere in Russia and then sent on its way—but only one very critical phase of the operation was effected: the paying of bribes. First, the harbormaster had to be greased to wave the shipment through. Then, at every stop along the journey, some other hand would have to do the waving, another harbourmaster, a trainmaster, a truck-stop manager, an airline pilot, even possibly a horse-and-buggy guy. Each of those hands had to be greased, or the goods wouldn't reach their destination.

Now you know why bribery is the lifeblood of this business. Paying them had to be factored into the operating budget. Call it 'operating expenses'—not that it went into the books that way, of course. Matthew would say, 'Let's just keep this our little secret.' And we did. It was the price we had to pay. However, Danny and I did not want to dirty our hands with the bribes. We left all that up to Matthew and Grigory. Evidently, they did their jobs well.

As of 1989, the coffers of Video Technology Ltd. were filling quite nicely, although the receipt of monies from our deals required a little game of legal hopscotch, as well, to shelter most of the profits and keep them away from the reach of the Australian tax collectors. Our prime need was a tax-free port, and Hong Kong fit the bill perfectly, as we would be doing a lot of business in the Far East. And since SovAustralTechnicka was the hub of all of our operations, we needed a second account in Moscow. So, among our first orders of business was to open a US-dollar account in Hong Kong and Moscow, meaning that the only tax we would be paying on Video Technology profits was on the relatively small amount we would bring in to Australia, basically to cover our living expenses.

As to how we would get the money from the sales, that was a two-step process that began even before the goods were moved. The buyer's bank would be sent copies of what is called a 'bill of lading' along with either letters of credit or commercial bills—not cash but rather proof of collateral that the cash was in escrow pending delivery of the goods. As soon as the goods were on the water and the bill of lading documentation verified by the harbourmaster, the cash would be wired to our account in Moscow or Hong Kong.

With that money, we would be able to fulfill Grigory's wish list of commodities he could sell for a fortune on the black market. Danny and I began globe-hopping, personally scouting for wholesalers. We'd hop off to Tokyo for photocopiers, telex machines, and computers; to China for clothing and food; to America for cars and trucks. Whatever

we needed, we bought and had it drop-shipped back to SovAustralTechnicka, then took off for the next destination. It was a mad, mad existence, and we were loving every minute of it. Our bags were never unpacked.

In the complex, high-stakes game of barter trade, we were careening down the highway at breakneck speed. We'd proven we could master the game. Other partners were coming forward in Russia, with wish lists a mile long. If the thought occurred to us that it was all too good to be true, it faded when a new list would come in. We saw no speed bumps ahead, no off-ramps. Only the lure of money on the blue horizon.

But was it too good to be true?

There was more good news that winter of '88, when I became pregnant—although in keeping with much else in my life, even that blessed event would be fraught with danger.

No birth is ever easy with me. My first daughter, Romy, had been overdue by two weeks and refused to come out until she'd put me through hell for thirty-two hours of labor. Avi had then deigned to stick around with us for all of three weeks before going off to India again on business, and I had to take Romy to my parents' home in Perth lest I had no support at all. Billie and Wally had made sure to come and stay with me during the last days of my pregnancy, which also stretched two weeks beyond my late-February due date.

In early March, I arranged with my doctor to check into St. Anne's Hospital so that he could induce labor, and I was admitted to the hospital on the night of March 8. Early on the morning of the 9th, he broke my water, and at 5:17pm, I gave birth to an eight-pound cherub as blonde and quiet as Romy had been dark and boisterous.

But as first Danny and then Billie cradled her, a drama was beginning to play out with me.

There had been a complication. The placenta had become stuck inside me, causing me to hemorrhage. I started to bleed, and the doctors couldn't stem it. Suddenly, the joyous birth of a child had turned into a race against time to save me from bleeding to death.

As searing pain gripped me, twisting me into knots on the gurney, I saw a horde of grim-faced doctors and nurses pour into the delivery room. I felt myself being wheeled out of the room. With an ashen face, Danny tried to keep up with the gurney. I was raced into an operating room, where doctors would try to extricate the placenta, hopefully before it was too late.

Semi-comatose and terrified, I began having thoughts of never waking up again, of my mother and father, of Romy, of Danny, poor Danny, who was about to lose his second wife—and at the very same hospital where Freda had died! Now he would be alone again and have to care for four children. My God, I thought, can't I just see my new baby, just one time before I die?

After being deposited on the operating table, an anesthesiologist pulled out another long needle.

'Am I going to die?' I managed to mumble, searching for reassurance that I wasn't.

Looking bored and completely unsympathetic while sticking a big needle in my spine, he sniffed, 'If you don't lie still, not only will you die, but you'll be paralysed when you die.'

Those awful words were the last ones I heard as I drifted into unconsciousness. Four hours later, I came to in the intensive-care ward, ringed by a maze of IV tubes. I would still need three transfusions because I had lost so much blood. I lay drained and groggy and still as a log for another twenty-four hours with a nurse at my bedside in case I began to bleed again. Whatever could go wrong, it seemed, did. During one of the transfusions, the bag holding the blood burst open, a very rare occurrence, and the doctors had to start over.

Danny kept a stolid vigil, though he was furious that he was not allowed to bring Melanie in for me to hold. She was being fed by bottle in the children's ward.

Finally, after two touch-and-go days, my condition improved, and I was wheeled in to see my beautiful new baby, whose eyes locked with mine for a brief moment, as if to tell me she knew who I was.

As my eyes welled up with tears of joy, I knew that that frozen moment in time would have been worth any amount of pain.

Melanie would keep me company in the hospital for a week before I was strong enough to leave the hospital and resume my life. And when I did, I reasoned that making it through this crisis must have been a sign from above, a sign that I had earned a few life points. If so, then all of my risk-taking might not be all that risky, after all. Before, I would have been perfectly happy being the most successful businesswoman in Australia.

Now, with our new business rolling, I wanted the world.

6

MELBOURNE AND RUSSIA, 1989

Even as we brought Melanie home to a now-expanded family of two boys and two girls, Danny and I knew we would have precious little time to play at being Ozzie and Harriet. With all sorts of contracts on the table and the wheels of our goods-transport network constantly in motion, we fancied ourselves more like Mr and Mrs Captains of Industry. With that feeling of exhilaration, though, came a rising sense of fear as well, that we could lose it all in a heartbeat if something went wrong.

Much of this quasi-paranoia had been ingrained in us by the always-hard-pushing Matthew Hurd. He seemed to be moving at warp speed himself, cracking the whip on the employees in the office in Melbourne to keep making bigger and better deals. Sylphlike, he would be here one day, gone the next to Moscow, having convinced us of the urgent need for him to go there and firm up business matters with the man we kept hearing more and more about, Grigory Miasnikov, general director of our SovAustralTechnicka joint venture. At first, Matthew took a photocopier and a telex machine to the SovAustralTechnicka office, stayed for a few weeks, and came back. By mid-1989, Russia seemed to be his second home. At our expense, he'd rented an apartment in downtown Moscow and would spend two or three months at a time there—to the consternation of his wife, Theresa, who suspected he had a woman on the side to keep him warm on those cold Russian nights. We too were concerned, since he was spending rubles like tonic water for vodka gimlets, and his expense reports left us needing a few stiff belts ourselves.

Still, Matthew was our trailblazer on this unknown journey. We had little choice but to put our money where his mouth was—though we often wished that mouth wasn't quite so big. In early June, again in Moscow, Matthew called us. His voice crackled over the speaker phone.

'You both have to come here and meet with Grigory,' he said, leaving no room for discussion. 'You have to meet all the heads of the joint ventures. These are big deals, and Grigory wants you to look over the contracts.'

As soon as we hung up, Danny and I looked at each other, sharing the same impish thought.

‘Did that sound a little like he was calling a meeting of the Five Families of the Mafia?’ I said with a laugh.

‘Does that mean we’re the Godfather and the Godmother?’ he said.

‘I just hope it doesn’t mean we’re getting whacked.’

It was this kind of dark comedy that would become common as we progressed deeper into the business, and it belied the little nugget of fear we had about dealing with Russian ‘businessmen’ we didn’t know from Trotsky, yet we were undeniably fascinated with the idea of going behind the Iron Curtain.

I, of course, had been smitten with the seductions and, by extension, the dangers of big-business globe-trotting when Avi had taken me to India. Now, I’d be one-upping that by going where few Westerners had stepped.

What’s more, this was a particularly momentous time in history to be making such an excursion. The march of Western culture had seeped through the Curtain, stirring up demands for sweeping changes in the hoary Soviet Union. The word freedom, once forbidden to be spoken in public, was echoing in the corridors of every town and province, shaking the foundation of the eight-decades-old span of Communist repression.

The feeling of anticipation in the air would soon break open like a champagne bottle. Within a few months, on November 9, 1989, Germans would be dancing atop the ruins of the Berlin Wall and on the grave of Communism, sparking a wave of Eastern European revolutions, the unification of Germany, and, within two months, an incredible upheaval in Russia. Even then, two other words—Glasnost and Perestroika—would be on everyone’s lips. These were Mikhail Gorbachev’s programs of openness and economic and political reforms, and they would be the wrecking ball of the USSR, and the building blocks of a new and shaky democracy, as well as a landscape of uncertainties and dangers.

Poised on the precipice of that seismic moment, we knew our business would have only greater earning potential. Until recently, Russians not privileged enough to be able to cut deals with Western merchants could not even sell trinkets in public parks. Now, like children taking their first baby steps, new capitalists were already stepping out of the shadows, encouraged to join in a free-market economy and private ownership. At the same time, because dying Communist holdouts clashed with the new system, threatening to crush it, the country’s economy couldn’t get off the ground; soon it would worsen, leading people to line up for goods, the most famous of which became toilet paper. Those long consumer lines symbolised the shortages of supplies to meet the demand. Needless to say, that too

was good for our business.

Not so promising were the dark repercussions of freedom—the scattering to the wind of the most onerous vestige of the dark age of Stalinism, the KGB. No longer needed to bludgeon dissent, the dreaded intelligence agency would itself be liquidated, sending unemployed agents out to roam the streets in search of work, honest or otherwise.

More than a few would find jobs in the Mob, where their unique 'skills' could come in handy to the highest bidder.

In the new Russian business class that teemed with people who lacked any sense of what business was, a few such 'advisers' might perhaps speed up a deal using 'persuasion.' For many new and struggling entrepreneurs, the alternative to hiring these free-agent thugs was going back to the toilet-paper line.

The ex-KGB enforcers would not be alone in that role. In the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union would at last break apart into separate republics, other, equally sinister forces would enter the picture in a marriage of necessity, not for business gain but to finance something few of us were aware of in 1989: fundamentalist Islamic terrorism. What we could not have known, as well, was that their targets would be Western businesspeople.

With all these historic currents swirling around us, Danny and I left our housekeeper, Susan, with the kids and boarded Yugoslav Airlines in early July, bound for Moscow. The flight seemed interminable, covering twenty hours with stops in Singapore, Belgrade, and Dubai. With some trepidation and a great deal of wide-eyed excitement, we finally landed at Sheremetyevo Airport on a bright, warm morning and made our way to the gate, where we spotted the familiar face of Matthew Hurd. In his usual perfunctory manner, wasting little time on niceties, he rushed us to collect our luggage, then led us to his car parked at the curb outside.

We had reservations at the Pekin Hotel on Sadovaya Street in downtown Moscow, and Matthew zipped his cheap compact car through traffic, snaking through busy streets and allowing us an all-too-brief look at the pillars of this gorgeous, if somewhat foreboding, city which glistened in the morning sun. After checking into our room, Matthew brusquely said we had no time to lounge around after the long flight, that we were due at the SovAustralTechnicka office.

After jumping back in his car, he wound his way to a single-level brick apartment building that had been converted into office space.

The address: 25 Chekhova Street.

Entering the front door and slip-sliding on a slick, overbuffed linoleum floor, we followed Matthew to a large, airless room in which a solitary man dressed in a gray business suit sat in a squeaky chair shuffling through some papers on a desk before him. He looked up, gave Danny and me the once-over and allowed a thin smile.

'Yvonne, Danny,' Matthew said, guiding us closer to the man with his arm, 'Grigory Miasnikov.'

'Ah, the famous Mr Miasnikov,' I said, shaking his hand. As I did, something made me want to pull my hand back, something that told me I'd probably be better off if I'd never met him.

Fifty-one years old, he was short and squat, about five foot seven, with a lantern jaw and a potbelly that hung over his belt buckle. Thin silver-rimmed glasses magnified a pair of small, darting eyes. Undeniably, he had presence. His hair was glossy silver, with not a strand out of place, and wound around his head with a kind of swashbuckling sweep. Unlike most other Russians, he was rather pale in complexion, more European, as if a Pole or Hungarian. I had a nickname for him: the 'White Russian.'

Though Miasnikov was to us a stranger, as we went with him over the following two weeks to business meetings all around Moscow with the directors of the four joint ventures he had enlisted for Video Technology, the other businessmen seemed to know him all too well. A strange pantomime began to play out whenever Grigory would appear in their offices; no matter what they were doing or to whom they were speaking, they would stop and wait for him to tell them something. When he did, it was in a hushed, nearly inaudible voice. Then they would nod and hop to some chore or another.

'Do they have to kiss his ring, too?' I whispered to Danny during one such vignette.

From what Matthew had told us, these men were respected businessmen, yet it was entirely plausible to believe Grigory had brought them in as underlings, nabobs, yes-men to do his bidding. Could Grigory have been making money from every deal we made in Russia? Could SovAustralTechnicka itself have been an umbrella for all the joint ventures?

Those were things Danny and I cared not to think much about. We simply let Matthew and Grigory handle the little details of the JVs. Still, we couldn't help but wonder at times during that trip if Miasnikov was so powerful that he could possibly make things difficult for us, if he so chose.

We had several meetings with him at 25 Chekhova Street over the next two weeks in order to review and finalise contracts for deals with the joint ventures. None of these deals were certified with anything

more than a handshake, which in Russia, we learned, was a sign of mutual respect and an unbreakable bond. And with each meeting, Grigory seemed to have a tighter grip around the others' throats.

At one meeting, Danny and I were in Grigory's office making small talk when Grigory heard one of the others say something in the hallway. We couldn't even hear a voice out there, but evidently Grigory had ears like a dog because he bolted out of his chair, ran out, grabbed this man by the collar, and half-spit, half-shouted at him, getting an inch from his face. It was a frightening sight, yet when he was through, he walked calmly back into the office, sat down, and picked up right where he had left off in the conversation, as if nothing had interrupted him.

We couldn't figure out if this was the 'Grigory Show,' meant for our benefit, to prove how in-charge he was, or whether he was truly a psychopath. If he had a hidden agenda, he would drop no clues to that effect, ever. Certainly, he wanted to ingratiate himself to us, and he did, charmingly, even obsequiously. He even opened up to us a bit about himself, though again we had no way of knowing what was true and what was designed to impress us. For example, though he never delineated his own religious persuasion, he stressed to us that his wife was a Jew. He said he had been divorced twice, and this wife was just eighteen—which piqued Danny's curiosity considerably, but just seemed plain sick to me. He said he had two young children, one of whom, a ten-year-old son, lived with him in Moscow. A twelve-year-old daughter lived with his first wife somewhere on the edges of Moscow.

THE MANY LIVES OF GRIGORY MIASNIKOV

Never did Miasnikov fill in the gaps of his professional background, which no one seemed to know. He did not mention the ten-year 'disappearance' it was suggested he'd had. Even so, it seemed highly unlikely he was simply a Russian businessman. Unbeknownst to the Weinstocks, Miasnikov's father had been a Soviet diplomat, possibly during the reign of the 'Butcher of the Ukraine,' Nikita Kruschev, at the height of the Cold War. His son, Grigory Miasnikov, was born in the then-enslaved republic of Tadjikistan but lived from ages eleven to fifteen in England, and by the time he was an adult, he had learned to speak five languages fluently, including perfect English.

Clearly, this was a man of myriad skills, an unusually high intellect, and vicious streak—all traits commonly sought out by

Russian intelligence agencies during the Cold War. Could Miasnikov, then, have been KGB? Could he have been one of those agents about to be turned loose to sell his services? Could he have been an active operative, tracking the Weinstocks' shipments for military hardware and software? Could he have been playing both ends against the middle until he could decide if he wanted to stay clean or go for a quick money kill? Would the impending breakup of the KGB force his hand to the latter?

Years later, Yvonne would be told by a high-ranking Russian intelligence source that, in 1989, Grigory Miasnikov was in fact a lieutenant colonel in the Russian army, working undercover. Having wangled his way into the position of general director of SovAustralTechnicka, he had access to and could have compiled a sheaf of information about all those goods being trafficked through and out of Russia. He could easily have been able to reroute some goods back to the army, or to even arrange for gangs along the travel routes to intercept entire shipments.

If any of these scenarios were true, how then did Matthew Hurd fit in? Was he an innocent, naive dupe? Was he recruited by Miasnikov at the 1980 Olympics and indoctrinated as a foreign operative? Or, given his excesses for knocking back bottle after bottle of vodka and chasing anything in a skirt, was he being blackmailed to use his entrée with the Weinstocks to entrench Grigory in the fold of a bustling global barter trade business?

Whatever Grigory's game, and Matthew's, Yvonne and Danny were in over their heads, playing a game far more perilous than they could have known. Meanwhile, Grigory Miasnikov kept them pacified, using his considerable, unctuous charm.

Herding us into his old white Mercedes, which he considered a status symbol, Grigory made it his business to play tour guide for us. He took us to a drab suburban area to meet his first wife, Olga, and daughter.

I could easily sense Grigory's distaste there, as if it was beneath his station. Or maybe it was that he felt he was not far removed from this depressing place where the people were grateful for anything they had. In Olga's sparsely furnished apartment, for example, the kitchen shelves were bare save for what were seemingly her most prized belongings: the cardboard cups and cheap plastic toys she had gotten from the McDonald's in Moscow. That McDonald's, in fact, was the most popular restaurant in Moscow. We drove past it a few times, and

always the line to get in stretched for blocks.

But then, given the Russians' tastes in dining, a Big Mac was a filet mignon by comparison. Danny and I one night had dinner at the house of a couple to whom Matthew had introduced us.

Apparently, they were so thrilled to have foreigners in their home that they put out a lavish spread which included pieces of stale rye bread, Beluga caviar, which is actually quite cheap in Russia, and butter. You were to spread a half-inch-thick mound of butter on the rye bread and top it off with a layer of caviar. This combination looked and tasted repulsive, but if you didn't eat it heartily while everybody made toasts with vodka to everyone else, you would offend all of them. I was so sickened from shoving that mound of butter and caviar into my mouth for hours that, to this day, I cannot eat caviar. Most else about that night are merely vague outlines because I put away so much vodka, I apparently became the entertainment for the evening, though I can't recall just what it is I did.

I do recall that one of the Russians looked at me incredulously and asked, 'Do all Australian women drink like you?'

'I hope not,' I was able to say, 'or the country is in big trouble.'

Danny, who was not much of a drinker, gave it a shot, but after one glass, he fell asleep under a table and lay there for two hours curled up in the fetal position. Danny almost had to be carried to Matthew's car for the trip back to the Pekin Hotel.

Less raucous were the wonderful hours I spent during the trip with another friend of Matthew's, a vivacious woman doctor named Natasha Amankwa. One day, she and I sat on some steps in Red Square near Lenin's Tomb and watched the parade of Russian life pass by. You could sense optimism among the people that by summer's end they'd be experiencing something unheard of, something of which they'd only dreamed. And yet, during those two weeks, I could also see the toll Communism had taken, on Jews in particular. Grigory had told us that the sight of any foreigners in the homes of Jewish people would arouse suspicion among the authorities who were always wary that Jews would defect, and that we had probably been watched by the KGB the night we went to that house party. On one Shabbas, Danny and I went to a synagogue located in downtown Moscow, surely one of the most beautiful synagogues I have ever been to. As soon as we sat down in the front pew for the service, Danny tapped me lightly on the arm and nodded to the rear wall behind us. I took a look and saw a group of men standing at the rear wall, their gaze hard on us.

'Goddamn KGB,' Danny said quietly under his breath.

To give Grigory due credit, for all his psychotic tendencies and air of foreboding, being with him eased the awkwardness Danny and I had being total novices to Russian culture and, more centrally, Russian business culture. He provided the essential tutorials that allowed us to follow the unique Russian protocols and make our meetings productive. We learned to anticipate that while these joint-venture people would possess very high expectations and would make serious demands, it was they who would be intimidated by us. They would, Grigory instructed, try to convince us they had the necessary credentials and experience when in fact they did not.

'Don't overestimate them,' he would say. 'Pay them respect, but don't be afraid to show them who is the boss'—though at times it was an open question whether he meant us or him.

Indeed, I had anticipated that being a woman would put me at a disadvantage. Instead, having dealt exclusively with men, they were at a loss to know how rude and demanding they could be with me.

Another bit of helpful advice from Grigory's playbook was that Russians always conducted business over endless rounds of vodka. To be sure, I had no objections to acceding to that custom and would leave meetings pleasantly numb from Absolut. But neither Danny nor I would leave drunk, since, as Grigory had pointed out, drinking wasn't merely a business tradition; it was a business ploy to get their opposite numbers to say yes to, well, just about anything, without realising to what they're agreeing. We avoided that, I'm sure, to their great shock.

Before we left Russia, Grigory was able to arrange for us a private tour of the Kremlin, which for Westerners had for decades carried the same kind of darkly mythic properties as the Sphinx or Stonehenge. In fact, it was off-limits to most foreigners. However, Grigory not only got us in, he was able to take us into the two mausoleum-like rooms where the crown jewels of the Czar and Czarina are displayed. Our eyes lit up seeing the Romanovs' shimmering gems under glass.

More relevant to Danny and me was what for us were the real Russian jewels, such things as steel, copper, tin—even fertiliser. We returned to Melbourne feeling like conquering generals, with deals on the table in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

It was, we decided, time to live large—not realising, and not wanting to know, what the consequences might be.

7

MELBOURNE AND RUSSIA, 1989–JANUARY 5, 1992

While we were making handsome money from our deals, Danny and I never really knew exactly how much we had in the bank at any given time. This was partly because we happened to have three banks in three different countries on two different continents, but also because current deals were always leveraged against future deals. It was never what had happened—the credo was what was going to happen; everything was invested on the next deal.

Given that reality, we were pushing our luck from the start, within a system that worked in reverse from normal mercantile trading. We were making shipments before getting paid, at the mercy of people we didn't know from Adam. Had we been smarter, we would have had someone we knew on the ground when those ships would be loaded, someone from the West, who could inspect the goods and prevent any tampering. We assumed, however, that nothing would ever go awry with any of our deals, and the money would keep rolling in. We were even brave—or misguided—enough to move into a bigger house, simply because the beautiful home we had built in Elsternwick had only five bedrooms, and Danny was upset that his den had to be converted into a nursery for Melanie. We thought nothing of buying a seven-bedroom home on Cole Street in Brighton, just four doors down the block from the house I had refused to live in when I married Danny.

This was our Xanadu, a half-acre of land with a tennis court and swimming pool. The house had a library, a den, and an ocean view. The price tag: $1 million. It would have been far beyond our means but for the splash we had made in the barter trade game. Using our pending deals—which were worth an aggregate of $23 million—we could borrow $700,000 from Chase Manhattan Bank. We showed them the contracts, and, bingo, we were approved. It mattered little that the mortgage was about $9000 per month as long as we had those deals, we kept telling ourselves.

Even the aforementioned COCOM laws prohibiting international trade of items that might have military applications couldn't slow us down. We were hardly arms dealers, but Australian customs inspectors

became suspicious when we tried to ship a state-of-the-art photocopying machine to Russia; they stopped the shipment and confiscated the machine. Danny and I were livid, and we raised such a ruckus with the customs agency that the local newspaper ran a story about it. Apparently, this so embarrassed the Australian government that, after six days, the copier was returned to us, although they were real bastards about giving it back. Is it any wonder we felt so heady? It seemed to us that we were immune from harm.

By mid-1991, the Iron Curtain had come down, and the demand within Russia to join the brave new world of capitalist trading opened up even more avenues for us. All told, we had now established eleven joint ventures, stretching beyond Moscow all the way to the continent's once-forbidding eastern coast of Siberia and Vladivostok, an area that was a virtual treasure trove of natural-resource goods. In Vladivostok, the joint venture was called Far East Trading Company, or, as they liked to be called, Vostok. Its director, a shadowy businessman named Mikhail Rud, cornered the market on fertiliser. While this might not seem so enviable, the fact is that good quality fertiliser—as oxymoronic as that sounds—can fetch a small fortune by itself in resource-poor countries like Taiwan. Agents from that country constantly peppered the Video Technology office with requests for shipments.

Once we had Vostok on board, we immediately put together a fertiliser deal for a cool $1.6 million. With our profits after expenses (read: bribes), we would fulfill Rud's wish list of black-market-saleable goods, which we would obtain at wholesale prices from free-market outlets worldwide. We would never even have to physically touch these items; they would be drop-shipped to Vostok. Neat, clean, simple, and very lucrative. For example, Rud's list on this deal looked like this:

1. Automobile crane, 'KATO' 40-ton capacity (with spare parts). Quantity: 10
2. Land Cruiser w/5 doors (with spare parts). Quantity: 10
3. Toyota Van, 15 seats (with spare parts). Quantity: 10
4. Toyota Carina II passenger car, European Variant diesel engine (with spare parts). Quantity: 10
5. Clothing (except fur, leather, coats): men's, women's, and children's shirts, trousers, socks, pullovers, dresses,

underwear.

6. Shoes: men's, women's, children's, sport and leather.
7. Bathroom and kitchen equipment.
8. Furniture (kitchen and room).
9. Sport bags, purses, cases, and briefcases.
10. Telefaxes.
11. Telephones.
12. Xerox machines.
13. Electrical typing devices (3-4 languages: English, German, and Cyrillic [Russian])

Given the fact that we had deals like this on the table for staggering amounts of money (again, $23 million in all), Matthew Hurd again urged—demanded, really—that Danny and I return to Moscow, to personally review and finalise many of these deals with the joint ventures. We hadn't been getting much information on the ventures lately from Matthew or Grigory, leading us to wonder if perhaps some of them might have been wavering, though we had no indication to that effect. And so we readily agreed to do the drill with Grigory and the boys, if only to put our minds at ease.

When we landed from the long flight, we were met at the airport by Grigory Miasnikov and a disheveled man in his late twenties named Richard Markson, the son of a very wealthy Melbourne copper and steel importer who also was doing business with Grigory. Apparently, Richard was useful to Grigory, allowing him to put another Australian 'face' to his operation. On this, another warm and lovely day in Moscow, Richard ferried us in his beat-up white Lada Niva automobile to his apartment, where we were supposed to stay during the trip. However, the place was a cramped, dingy mess. Rather than give up his bed, Richard put us on a skinny couch and said good night. Neither of us slept a wink that night and the next morning we fled the apartment and booked a room around the block at the Sputnik Hotel near our SovAustralTechnicka office on Chekhova Street.

Over the next two days, Danny and I bounced like pinballs between the hotel and the office, taking meetings with the joint ventures, but it was clear that Grigory had only a passing interest in most of these meetings. Also clear was the fact that Grigory had changed since our last trip here. He was snippier, less charming, and seemingly preoccupied. Even when he was talkative, which was rare, he spoke in riddles. If we asked him a question, he'd avoid giving a straight answer, instead navigating carefully around the fringes of the subject. You'd want to slap him and say, 'Just answer the damn question!' Now he was even more oblique and seemed not to want to

look us in the eye. When we tried to ask about the profit margins of SovAustralTechnicka, he became nervous and evasive, never actually telling us.

Still, things went routinely on our rounds. Most of the directors of the newer joint ventures, unlike a good many of the pre-Perestroika ones, seemed elated to be able to make money in the new Russian economy, even if they knew not a thing about business. One group, from Mongolia, sat in the Chekhova Street office almost afraid to say anything—which, of course, was the cue for Grigory to act like their master, doing all their talking for them.

Another venture, Multicom, was co-directed by Nikolai and Olga Bondarenko, husband and wife, jolly, round-faced people with wide-eyed dreams of success, just as we were in the beginning.

Grigory, though, could not be bothered to join in such revelry. He was almost entirely focused on one thing: a meeting with the joint venture from Vladivostok, Vostok. That meeting occurred in the lobby of the Sputnik Hotel shortly before we would leave for home, and it was then that we met the biggest cog in our business dealings: Mikhail Rud of the Vostok joint venture.

That moment is burned into my mind because it was the precise moment that the house of cards on which our business was built began to collapse.

Rud was a particularly prickly fellow. In his mid-thirties, around six feet tall, linguini thin, with unruly hair that fell over his forehead, he had a baby face but an empty soul. Not once did I see him smile. When he walked into the foyer of the hotel, he was accompanied by three equally dour associates. As a group, they had all the charm of a welcoming party from a funeral parlor. Though they wore cheap, ill-fitting suits instead of pinstripes and silk ties, they gave the impression of being old-fashioned gangsters who would kill in the blink of an eye.

Rud nodded hello to Grigory, who introduced him to Danny and me, acting as Rud's interpreter. Extending his hand, which felt like a limp dishrag, Rud was in no mood for small talk. He descended into a chair next to Grigory across a low marble table from us and began to speak with quiet intensity while sucking hard on a cigarette. From his first sentence, we knew that Rud was not happy. Something was wrong. We looked to Grigory to put whatever that something was in English, and when he did—seeming to anticipate what Rud would say before he ever said it—a rather unbelievable tale rolled out.

It had to do with the deal we had made with Vostok in which they shipped from Vladivostok a large supply of fertiliser to our buyers in Taiwan. Rud's people had valued the fertiliser—rather exorbitantly—at $1.6 million. But when it was delivered, the

Taiwanese balked, insisting that the protective bags carrying the fertiliser had broken during shipping and that what had arrived was found after chemical analysis to be of inferior grade.

How costly was it now that we'd had no one on the ground in Vladivostok and Taiwan to verify quality? The answer: about $1.6 million, or almost the entire value of the deal, since the Taiwanese had refused to pay more than $400,000. After expenses, that left Video Technology with a net profit of only around $50,000, peanuts, and certainly nowhere near enough to be able to fill Mr Rud's wish list —the only phase of the transaction about which Rud cared.

'Unacceptable,' he said through Grigory adamantly denying he had sent tainted fertiliser to Taiwan.

Rud sputtered that he'd been ripped off and was holding us responsible—even though of course we had been the ones who'd taken the beating on the deal.

'Something has to be done,' he said. 'You must make good on the deal.' By that, he meant we'd have to eat the loss and still get him his goods.

Danny and I sat looking at each other, stunned. The free ride that we'd been on just became very expensive.

A CONSPIRACY OF THIEVES?

Could this bum deal have been Grigory's handiwork? If he had been an undercover spy, and indeed had become a free agent after the fall of the Iron Curtain, could he have determined that this shipment, with its $1.6 million price tag, presented the best conditions for turning on his 'partners' and setting in motion his big score: a plot to extort the Weinstocks? If he was in fact the overseer of the joint ventures, could he have conspired with the execrable Mikhail Rud to pull off a 'squeeze play' on Yvonne and Danny, and frame them into eventually forking over a huge bounty—and not merely in goods but cold cash?

Or, perhaps in Machiavellian style, could he have been playing Rud for a fool as well, stoking his demands from the Weinstocks while keeping up a pretense of loyalty to them—in effect, using his influence to embolden Rud and turn up the heat on Yvonne and Danny at the same time?

Surely, Miasnikov's increasing distance from the Weinstocks hinted at just such a hidden agenda. The most logical question was why Grigory had not bothered to inform them of this rift with Vostok.

Grigory surely had to know about it for weeks now, being the point man for the business in Russia. And what about Matthew Hurd? He was the conduit between Miasnikov and the Weinstocks, the man on whose word they had brought in Miasnikov. Was Grigory keeping information from him, too? Or were they scheming together, double-teaming the Weinstocks? And was that Matthew's plan all along, from day one?

Yvonne and Danny were not in a position to confront either or both men about these scenarios, even if they had any cause to be suspicious. Naive as they were, a more important matter was that they smooth over the fissure with Vostok, and for that they needed Miasnikov. Without Grigory, the chain of trust would be broken with the joint ventures—putting the $23 million in deals in dire jeopardy. They were, as Grigory well knew, in the palm of his hand.

Grigory may have been feeling the rush of that power when, in the lobby of the Sputnik Hotel, he posed a solution to the Vostok problem: Rud should present the Weinstocks with a new wish list of goods. Pacified, Rud seemed to uncoil a bit.

He became less confrontational, and the conversation actually turned civil. Though our heads were still spinning, Danny and I were genuinely contrite that things had gone wrong with the deal and promised to make them right.

You're thinking: what a naive pair. And you are correct. We were. Rather than being consumed by doubts about this entire scenario, rather than putting two and two together and realising that it may have been completely contrived for reasons unkind to us, we were still blinded by money. And so we were eager to make good on the deal. If we could shepherd those $23 million in deals through, what would a $1.6 million loss be in the grand scheme of things? A bad deal. A tax write-off. A blip on the radar screen.

On September 28, we came back to our million-dollar home with the $9000-per-month mortgage, ready to breed more money. Only now it wasn't as easy. For one thing, economic conditions had worsened, which was beyond our control. In the early nineties, we felt the sting of the recession that had begun in the late eighties after the American stock market collapsed. That led to the devaluation of the American dollar worldwide. Of course, our main bank account in Hong Kong was a US dollar account, and the value of our assets sank as though in quicksand. Suddenly, it wasn't as easy to pay that mortgage every month or to pay for our aggrandised lifestyle.

Making money, then, was still our obsession, but it wasn't only because we wanted to. It was because we had to.

Once back home, we intended to stay put a while, to spend more time with the family we'd been neglecting to go globe-hopping. We'd seen too little of the kids, and it might have been taking a toll on them. A now-teenaged Romy, for instance, had become quite rebellious. This of course is a common theme of teenagehood, but some of it seemed to be directed at her parents—such as when we would come home and find that, after Romy had turned the house into party central, the furniture would be overturned and the swimming pool filled with empty beer cans. Danny's oldest son, Jonathan, also in his teen years, began to act out as well, prompting Danny to throw his hands up and send Jonathan to America to live for a year with the brother of Danny's late wife, Freda, DrIsrael Rayman, who with his wife, Wendy, lived in Wayne, New Jersey, a bedroom suburb of Philadelphia. Israel, or Ian as his friends called him, was a pediatrician and had a twenty-one-year-old daughter, Lisa. Lisa had just graduated from Syracuse University and was eager to see what the world looked like outside of America. Ian suggested she come and stay with us as a kind of 'fair exchange' program, and we thought it was a fine idea. Lisa, hopefully, would have a calming influence on Romy.

However, because of the exigency of fixing the thorny situation with Mikhail Rud and Vostok, our pool boy put in more time at the house than did Danny and I. We were working overtime now, feeling out new investors in Video Technology, raising capital to make up for that $1.6 million beating we'd taken in Taiwan. Fortunately, the word of mouth about our success (we breathed a deep sigh of relief that the bad news hadn't slipped out) created a virtual stockpile of investors, as well as potential partners in Russia. Things were still on track. The big picture looked bright.

And then came a dark cloud. Two dark clouds, to be exact.

First, there was Matthew Hurd. He had gotten less and less responsive, to the point that we were now relieved when he took off on his periodic trips to Moscow. 'Let's hope he stays there for good this time,' Danny and I would tell each other. Unfortunately, he always came back, and he even bought a house in ritzy South

Caulfield, which we congratulated him on—until we found out how he bought it.

Back in July, when Danny and I had taken the family on a vacation to Surfer's Paradise, we left our accountant, Albert, four blank, signed cheques, specifically to be used only for petty cash and to pay the salaries of office employees. (All monies for the shipping of goods came from the Hong Kong account.)

That was our normal procedure, and, again naively, we thought little about it.

After we returned, though, our accountant in Hong Kong, an eagle-eyed Chinese man named Alan Cheung, had some distressing news for us. After going through the company's books, he'd found a slew of discrepancies; in effect, well over a hundred thousand dollars had been taken from the account, with no explanation as to where it went.

I gulped hard when hearing this, as it meant we were in even worse shape financially than we had reason to believe. It also meant there was a quisling within the ranks. But who? Knowing that no one could be trusted—not Albert, not Matthew, no one beyond Danny and me—I quietly began to do my own detective work, with only Alan aware of what I was doing. First, we pored over all the financial statements from the Hong Kong account for the previous eighteen months.

Although Danny and I, as executive directors of Video Technology, were the only ones authorised to sign cheques, Matthew —forbidden to do so as general director—had over that time period called Alan more than a few times insisting he needed cash to cover shipments and the purchasing of goods. These requests were at first small, then kept growing larger, and a few could not be accounted for —including a good number of payments wired to Austria, which we originally figured were to cover goods shipments of some kind.

Next, I went through all of the canceled cheques over that time period and found one in the amount of $131,000, payable to Citibank of Melbourne. Doing some more gumshoe work, I found out what the price of Matthew's house had been. It was exactly $131,000. I had found the smoking gun. Even so, I had a hard time convincing Danny that this evidence was definitive. He had always been far more enamored of Matthew than I was and reluctant to confront him. Indeed, I often felt as if I were the one wearing the pants between us. And on this matter, I was unyielding: We needed to cut this cancer out of our business.

'Okay,' Danny said, not wanting to fight me, 'let's do it.'

What the Weinstocks didn't know, and would not know until much later, was that a secret bank account in Vienna had been opened two years before and was being well-fed with funds siphoned from Video Technology Ltd's accounts in Hong Kong and Moscow. The owner of the Austrian account was an Australian, who would wire money from Hong Kong or Moscow. Several times, he had come in person to the bank, accompanied by a Russian. He would sign the deposit slips, complete the transaction, crumple up his copy of the receipts, then throw them into the wastebasket.

Technically, we couldn't just fire Matthew; as a director, he could only be removed by a formal vote in a meeting of all three directors. We organised the meeting for October 1, at the office of our attorney, Joe Krycer, in the Melbourne suburb of St. Kilda. Matthew had no idea what was afoot. Believing it was a routine matter to vet contracts, he sat down at the table in the conference room, sipping coffee with not a care in the world. Then we came in with Joe, who pulled out the cheque to Citibank.

'Matthew,' Joe began, 'about this $131,000 …'

Matthew almost spit up his coffee. The look on his face seemed to be saying: 'Uh-oh.'

Clearly, he was shocked that we had found him out. For two years, he had assumed not only that we were bumpkins but that we were in his thrall. He sat rigidly in his chair, trying to remain outwardly cool, emphatically denying he had misappropriated company money. Eventually, he became belligerent. 'You two,' he said, red-faced, his voice rising, 'aren't the reason this company is a success—I am!'

But he knew the final act was here and that he couldn't rewrite the ending. Joe asked for a vote on removing Matthew as a director. At 'All in favour,' Danny and I raised our hands. Matthew didn't bother to raise his as 'All opposed' was called. It was over.

Joe told Matthew he would have to leave the building immediately. He gathered up some things on the desk, and Danny, Joe, and I walked him downstairs, no one saying a word as our footsteps echoed in the stairway. For Danny and me, it was a terribly sad moment, in that Matthew had indeed gotten us to where we were —but also, it could be argued, to the brink of bankruptcy as well. Again much more than Danny, I was angered that Matthew had so

abused our trust and played us as easy marks in a con game. In fact, if not for my adamancy, I'm not sure Danny would have ever sacked him.

Out in the parking lot, Matthew began to climb into his car, a Holden Calais we had bought for him to use as a company car.

'Just one thing,' Joe told him. 'Please hand over your keys to the office and the company car, and your company mobile phone.' Matthew, turning scarlet, took the key off his key ring and pulled out the mobile phone. Again he began to get into the car.

'Matthew,' I said, 'the keys to the car, too.'

'And how am I supposed to get home?' he asked.

'The bus stop's on the next corner.' I didn't mean to be nasty. But after the damage he had done, I wasn't about to let him sneak away in that beautiful car.

And he knew there was no card left for him to play. Utterly defeated, he gave up the key. Then, glaring at Danny and me demonically, he took his parting shot: 'I'm going to crucify you.'

As relieved as I was to have gotten this over with—I'd been unable to sleep the night before thinking about it—the threatening words barely resonated. I even had some pity for him. I thought, he's angry, he got caught, but he'll get over it.

In fact, we had more pressing things to worry about. With Matthew having looted the company, Danny and I had to confront the reality that Video Technology Ltd. was teetering on the brink. That $23 million bounty we were relying on to make things all better was now hanging by a slender thread.

Worse, with Matthew not around to screen all the calls, people whom he had never put through to us before were telling us now that Matthew had made outlandish promises to the joint ventures. To some he had even promised cash payments, something that was never part of our arrangement with the Russians. 'Where's the money?' they wanted to know. We tried to explain how Matthew had worked at cross-purposes with us, but it mollified nobody. 'We're getting everything together,' we'd tell them all. 'We're going to get it done. In the end, there'll be more than enough to go around for everybody.' And, of course, Mikhail Rud was becoming ever more impatient about getting the goods on his wish list. He also couldn't have been happy that, although he had given us a photograph of himself during our last meeting with him in Moscow so that we would use it to get him a visa to go to Hong Kong and personally look over the goods he wanted, we

felt we owed him no such favour. If he was steamed about it, we said, tough.

There was another complication with Rud as well. According to him, no one had paid the mandatory bribe money on that ill-fated fertiliser shipment, which may have explained the broken bags. People along the way had let the shipment through, but now they were coming for their IOUs—amounting to around $50,000. That, of course, had been Matthew's job. Evidently, he'd just stopped paying the bribes on some shipments and kept the money for himself. Now, Rud expected us to cover the debt.

High times had now become desperate times.

Enter cloud number two, in the inscrutable form of Grigory Miasnikov, who could turn any sunny day bleak.

In the days after we'd canned Matthew, Grigory moved quickly into the breach. Learning that Matthew was out, Grigory called from Moscow and all but invited himself to Melbourne, the purpose being to talk about the precarious state of the business. Needing any help we could get, we flew him in on October 6th; he would stay for one week.

As soon as he arrived, the first thing he said he wanted to do was see our house. When we brought him to Brighton, he seemed to be transported into a new dimension. 'Nice, very, very nice,' he muttered again and again as he explored our house like a child at Disney World.

It may have seemed an over-the-top reaction by a successful and hard-headed businessman, but entirely understandable in the light of Russian realities. By Western standards, our home was not overly opulent; it was no more impressive than any other home in the area. By Russian standards, however, it was undeniably a palace. He also seemed not to grasp what a mortgage was or that we were leveraged up to our necks. For all his dreams of grandeur and pretense of making high-powered deals, he was nothing more than a common Russian lowlife.

GRIGORY'S VICTORY

Why was Miasnikov really there? Money seemed to be on his mind, specifically how much the Weinstocks had and how much people they knew had. As it happened, during his stay, Ian and Wendy Rayman also visited Melbourne to visit Danny's first wife's family. One night, they arranged to meet Yvonne and Danny at Toto's Pizza Restaurant in Elsternwick. There, they met Grigory, who was duly impressed that Ian was a doctor in America—again unaware of the

subtle distinctions of Western life; in this case, that pediatricians are not the highest-paid doctors. The Raymans felt a little like they were being sized up.

Then, too, several times during his stay, Grigory would stroll around the grounds of the Weinstocks' home, a camera in his hand, snapping pictures of the pool and the tennis court as well as the exterior of the house. Yvonne and Danny attributed this to simple admiration for their lifestyle. But what was Miasnikov's game? His fawning didn't add up. Grigory, after all, was no fool. He had lived in England for a time, and his father had been a diplomat. Miasnikov had dealt with Westerners before. Was it credible that he had never travelled to Western cities, seen upscale homes? Moreover, he had arrived with a camera in his luggage yet took pictures only of the Weinstocks' estate. Was this because he needed evidence to take back to Russia, to convince people like perhaps Mikhail Rud that the Weinstocks had money to burn? If so, did he now believe—debts and mortgages aside—that the time was right to make a move against them?

Would any such plot require that Grigory inveigle himself deeper into the Weinstocks' affairs at Video Technology? If so, he pulled it off like a charm. At the Video Technology office, he threw his weight around, acting as if he was in charge. With Matthew gone, he noted, 'You need someone to replace him immediately.' With not a trace of shame, he made it clear who that someone had to be: Grigory Miasnikov. On the spot, Yvonne and Danny cut him in as general director.

Finally, having set the trap, he would need the Weinstocks to step into it. This he accomplished by insisting that the couple make yet another pilgrimage to Moscow, to sort out all the tangles of the business, specifically the mess with Mikhail Rud. While he probably could have convinced them to come on their own, he couldn't afford to take any chances that they would not step onto Russian soil again. Thus, he grandly handed Yvonne and Danny a pile of traveller's cheques totalling $5000. 'This,' he said, 'will help you make the arrangements.' That clinched it.

When the cagey Russian went back to Moscow on October 13, he carried with him several rolls of film, the title of general director of Video Technology Ltd., and the knowledge that the 'filthy rich' Weinstocks would soon be taking the same trip.

It had been, he may have told himself on the plane, a very

productive week.

Grigory had made it clear, as well, that we had no choice but to go to Moscow yet again, and very soon, to reassure Rud and the other joint ventures that we could cover the deals and to restate agreements that had stalled during the last few months. Danny and I knew we would need to do this. In fact, we'd told Rud we'd be back as soon as we'd taken care of business in Melbourne. By December, we had raised over a million dollars worth of capital, and we prepared to settle and extend all company business. We were feeling more optimistic than we had in months.

In fact, things were going so nicely that we decided to let the Moscow trip wait until after the new year. We did fly off, but to America, in mid-November. The first stop on the itinerary was Las Vegas—appropriately, we laughed, given that this barter trade thing was such a gamble in itself—to attend what's called the Comdex Exhibition, which every year boasts the newest high-technology items. We then made our way east to Wayne, New Jersey, to drop in on Ian and Wendy Rayman, who were having a twenty-fifth wedding anniversary party.

I always found Ian to be a wonderful man who never had any hostility for me as the woman who had taken the place of his beloved sister. Although this was his day of celebration, he made sure to raise a glass to me at the reception.

Knowing that Danny and I would soon be going to Russia, in the dead of winter this time, Wendy took me to a shopping mall so I could buy some outerwear—something I had never needed in Australia—and I bought a vivid purple snow coat in which I resembled the Michelin Man. When we said our goodbyes to Ian and Wendy, we issued the mandatory invitation for them to visit us in Australia.

'Let's talk about it when you get back home after Russia,' Ian said. 'Call us when you get back.'

We returned home on December 8, to enjoy a warm and wonderful holiday Chanukah with our family, and I was thrilled that we were joined by my thirteen-month-older sister, Erica, who arrived a week later from Perth with her son Adam and would stay until January 8.

On New Year's Eve, Danny and I lifted our champagne glasses to making 1992 our best year ever. The first order of business in the new year, of course, was going back to Russia, a trip that we fully expected would dissolve all the business problems that had cropped up over the last few months.

Evidently, people in Russia were eager for us to get there. Very eager. Just before Christmas, I had mailed out our applications for visas to the Russian Embassy in Canberra, via Express Post Service, with an extra $30 for fast priority shipping. Normally, this process can take weeks. However, someone must have put us on a very fast track. The week between Christmas and New Year's, someone named Andrei Ovcharenko, who said he worked at the embassy, called from Canberra to say the visas had already gone out. On Thursday, January 2, they arrived by messenger at our door.

Only three days later, a Sunday morning, we kissed the kids good bye and threw our luggage in the back of our Volvo. We were on our way.

Danny was at the wheel, with me in the passenger seat. In the back seat was Erica, who would drive our car back after we'd taken off. En route to Tullamarine Airport in Melbourne, Erica suddenly had an odd thought.

'Do you both have wills made out?' she asked.

I was a bit surprised. 'Well, yes, but they're out of date.'

'Well,' she said, 'if anything happens to you, I will take care of Melanie. She's so gorgeous.'

Worry wart, I thought. But then, both of my sisters were. Jan, my older sister was always skittish about these Russian adventures, not sharing my sense of wanderlust. Jan's husband, Colin, was an expert about Russian geopolitical affairs and had warned Danny and me right at the start not to get involved in this dangerous business.

'Whatever you do,' Colin would say, 'don't go to Russia. Don't get involved with those thugs.'

I just sighed. Having gone to Russia twice and returned in one piece each time, I was somewhat jaded. We would go there this time, take care of business, and be home in two weeks. Danny and I had done the tourist routine, we'd seen the Czar and Czarina's jewels. This time would be all business.

'At least I'll get to wear my new purple coat,' I said, laughing.

'And you'll need it,' Danny piped in. 'They say you don't really know what winter is until you live through one in Russia.'

POSTSCRIPT

At about the same time, in a town called Noginsk some twenty-five miles northeast of Moscow, a turbid man with a bushy mustache sat at the kitchen table with half a dozen men and went over with them what would happen once the Weinstocks' plane landed in Moscow. He checked his watch and said, 'Anee Ee-doot.' Meaning, 'They are coming.'

PART TWO
THE ELEVEN DAYS

8

DAY ONE: JANUARY 6, 1992, MOSCOW AND NOGINSK

Flying to Moscow is never easy. The trip is a long, tedious exercise in sustained boredom. On that morning of January 5, we flew again on Yugoslav Airlines and caught the 11am flight to Singapore, an eight-hour jag. While the plane refueled, I bought a large packet of Twinings tea bags to give to the ladies who worked in the Moscow office and a Mickey Mouse T-shirt for Melanie. Then we were off again, on a seven-hour trek to Dubai, landing at 3am local time.

With hours to kill before the next leg of the flight and nothing open in the airport, we slept for a couple of hours on the hard seats in a lounge, then I sat and embroidered a doily for my Russian doctor friend Natasha Amankwa. Finally, at 7:30am, we took off on a three-hour hop to Belgrade, the last pit stop before the three-and-a-half-hour flight to Moscow. Just thinking of all the hours we had to kill makes me feel languid. Back then, it frayed our nerves. During those last hours en route to Moscow, Danny pulled out a copy of Russian Made Simple and began droning words and phrases over and over, making me a bit crazy.

'You're disturbing everyone on the plane,' I said.

'If they don't like it, they can tell me themselves,' he replied.

I just gritted my teeth. If the plane didn't land soon, I thought, we're going to wind up hating each other. Being cooped up for twenty-three and a half hours was too much for any couple.

When the pilot came on the intercom and announced we were in the skies over Russia, I studied the business agenda we had drawn up. It all looked very routine and uneventful. Perusing the nearly unbroken itinerary, my eyeballs nearly glazing at the agate type, I wondered if we would have any time during the next week to do anything but attend meetings with the partners. These were the areas to be discussed:

1. Imports into Russia
Food products, beer, meat, egg products, canned fruit
Consumer products: cigarettes

Raw materials: wool

Business office equipment: computers, peripherals, electronic components

Clothing from China

2. Exports from Russia

Fertilisers

Scrap metals: coppers, aluminium

Homewares: light fixtures, cutlery, rugs, fabric

Metal Components: petrol filters, canistra

3. Service Industries in Russia

IBIS information database

Computer software development

4. Public Company in Australia

Percentage of each joint venture

US dollar contribution to each JV

Contract: Ernst/Young Moscow office

Transfer ownership from Video Technology Ltd. to CTI

5. Investment Trust

Raise $50 million for investment projects

Multicom Port facility at Kalingrad

Airport at Vladivostok

6. Beresnev, Novosibirsk

Management training in Australia

7. JV Interine Ormset

Computers from Video Technology-Hong Kong-John Fung-VTech, Computers

8. JV Sparta

Mr Lev Kofman visit to Australia—contact and meet for public company

9. Minsk

Mr Gulev, Minister of Light Industry

Mr Mikhnevitch

Letter to Mr Kiebitch

10. Mongolia

Copper-wire production facility

11. JV SovAustralTechnicka

Contribution to charter fund

Service centre equipment

Used clothing

Racehorses

Poultry farm

BNTV satellite and cable equipment for transmission and reception for Australia

12. Contact and Meet for Public Company

JV Mayak

JV Intervils

JV Amra

JV Multicom

13. Business Relationship

1. Company structure

• Use existing bank accounts in Hong Kong

• New companies: HK, Australia, Switzerland, Malta, Channel Islands

2. Change authorisation procedure for bank accounts

3. Accounting

For overheads, overseas travel, administrative costs, buying commissions, selling commissions

In the early afternoon in Moscow, the wheels finally touched down at Sheremetyevo Airport. With me wearing my new coat, we left the plane and approached the border guards' inspection station, prepared to endure the usual drawn-out ritual of the guards combing over our passports and asking a ton of prying questions. Instead, remarkably—and, in retrospect, perhaps not coincidentally—they practically swept us through.

'Business?'

'Yes.'

Stamp. Bang. We were done.

Next we found a kacca, a cash control kiosk where foreign currency is exchanged for rubles—eighty rubles to a US dollar was the exchange rate then. We paid five rubles for a baggage cart, loaded it up with our bags when they came out on the carousel, then headed for the customs inspection table, normally another nerve-fraying hassle. However, once again, it was as if we were royalty. The agent didn't even look in our bags and was so deferential he may as well have genuflected as we passed through. The reason for the red-carpet treatment may have become evident when we moved toward the glass door just beyond the table and saw the only person we knew who could apparently make Russian mountains move—Grigory Miasnikov, who was standing, arms folded, beside young Richard Markson.

Seeing Grigory was a major surprise. We had expected Richard to meet us, alone. In fact, we had not been able to reach Grigory by phone during the previous week and were told he had left Moscow on a business trip, something to do with a scrap cable project. Even

before that, Grigory had not been answering our faxes. Of course, we'd come to live with Grigory being unresponsive, passing it off as 'just Grigory's way.' And, as much as he could at times be magnificently rude, we were genuinely happy to see him at Sheremetyevo He had been our Moscow sled dog, guiding us through uncertain terrain.

Grigory, though, had no bouquets of tulips for Danny and me. Like a drill sergeant, after saying no more than a perfunctory hello, he was issuing orders to follow him out of the terminal door, with the hapless Richard struggling to keep up while pushing the luggage cart across the slippery floor.

Outside, as I felt the bracing winter cold, Grigory met up with a tall, solidly built, dark-skinned man with a bushy mustache and covered head to ankle by a black overcoat.

'This is Oleg,' Grigory introduced him. 'He will be our driver for today.'

A little background: On our first two trips to Moscow, Grigory had arranged for us to go from meeting to meeting by sending drivers named Yura or Andrei. However, either Grigory or Richard had taken us from the airport. So we were a bit baffled on a couple of counts.

'Where are Yura and Andrei?' I asked.

'They're still with us, but not today,' he said.

Odder still was that Richard began to load our luggage into the trunk of his familiar white Lada Niva, yet Grigory's white Mercedes 220 was parked just behind it. Oleg had gotten into the driver's seat, and Grigory directed us to get in for the ride to the Sputnik Hotel, where we were again to stay.

As I walked to the Mercedes, I had an uncomfortable pang in my tummy that something was not quite right here. That feeling probably had a lot to do with Oleg, whom I found absolutely disgusting. Yura and Andrei had been friendly, lovely men. Oleg, with his beady, slit-like eyes, just seemed to be full of hatred. Not wanting to sit next to him, I slid into the back seat. Grigory got in next, to my left in the back. Danny then climbed into the front passenger seat beside Oleg, who started up the car and pulled away from the curb, with Richard following behind us in his car.

As we turned out to the exit road, I looked out the window at the landscape of Russia in winter. It was very different, very depressing. Those bright hues of summer and autumn were replaced by a veneer of steel gray. It was not a terribly cold day, maybe around minus 1 degree Celsius (30 degrees Fahrenheit), but the wind was howling, the sky was pale, and patches of dirty snow littered the ground. Something else was different, too. I watched for the usual turn onto the main road, yet Oleg bypassed it, staying on the outer ring road

that took us in a different direction. Before, we had gotten right out into heavy traffic. Now, no other cars were on this road. Oh well, I thought, Oleg must know a shortcut. I sat back, my eyes closing.

Some five minutes later, I heard Oleg mumbling something. I opened my eyes and saw his face in the rear-view mirror, wearing a look of concern. Although the ride seemed smooth, he was acting as if he were fighting the steering wheel. He said a few words in Russian to Grigory, who said there was a problem with a tire.

Oleg yanked the car onto the right shoulder of the one-way road and stopped. Then, with not a shred of warning, our world was turned upside down.

With dizzying suddenness, a long and baleful-looking black sedan, having sliced between the Mercedes and Richard's Lada Niva, crept up behind us and screeched to a stop. By all appearances, it was a Zil, a Russian-made car that for many years were hardly ever seen except on the highways around Moscow in the so-called 'KGB lane', the one that could only be used by KGB agents. Little wonder that the Zils send shudders down the spines of Russians everywhere.

Now, the shudders went down my spine, more so when I saw five men inside the Zil who looked and dressed much like Oleg all jump out and come right at the Mercedes. One of them pulled open the unlocked door beside me, and he and another man reached in. Too stunned to react, I felt myself being dragged out of the car by my arms like a rag doll.

I was screaming now. I tried somehow to dig my heels into the asphalt of the road to brake the momentum of my upper body but could feel myself being manhandled, my feet merely scraping the pavement as I was carried along and quickly forced into the back seat of the Zil.

With no control of my body, it was as if I was a spectator watching myself in a movie. I could hear my voice pleading and crying, feel hands holding me down, but my brain couldn't process it all fast enough to realise that this was actually happening to me. I could also see, as if through a tunnel, that Danny had been pulled from the front seat of the Mercedes and was now in the back, flanked by two men, one of whom had a vice-like grip on the hair at the base of Danny's neck. Oleg had turned around in the driver's seat and was waving his fist just inches from Danny's face.

I tried calling out to him, but nothing came out of my mouth. And in the next instant, the Mercedes had driven off with a great roar. I looked to follow its path down the road but almost immediately lost sight of it.

I craned my neck looking all around. I saw Richard Markson behind us, still sitting at the wheel of his Lada Niva, white with fear,

seemingly unable to move, incapable of being any help, having evidently been ordered to do as he was told.

I was alone. Danny was gone, and all I could see were two grotesque men holding me down. All I could smell was their foul breath. What was going to happen to me? Was I about to be killed? Raped? Dumped on this isolated road? And why was this happening at all? What the hell was going on?

'MONEY! MONEY!'

The answer was revealed up ahead in the Mercedes where two men were holding Danny in a hammerlock. Grigory Miasnikov, who had said nothing during the abduction, was ready to speak. Slowly turning around in the front passenger seat, he began, tersely rolling out words that had no doubt been scripted for weeks.

'These gentlemen,' he said, 'are here to collect the money you owe to the Far East Trading Company, Vladivostok. One point six million dollars. You will not leave the country until this debt is paid.'

Now it was all becoming clear. When Mr. Rud had given the Weinstocks his revised wish list at that tense meeting in the Sputnik Hotel lobby last September, he likely had no intention of settling for barter. He wanted cash—the price of the original value of the fertiliser shipment.

Less clear was the extent of the conspiracy between Rud and Miasnikov. Rud may have schemed with Grigory to sabotage the infamous shipment in order to blame Yvonne and Danny for not protecting it, or Grigory might have gone behind Rud's back and feigned surprise when Rud reported the bad shipment to him. In the latter case, Rud would have been just as duped by Miasnikov as had the Weinstocks. Still, it took no leap of imagination to believe Rud had inflated the fertiliser price from the start. Now that price was the bottom line in an extortion plot.

The only goods being bartered now were the lives of Yvonne and Danny Weinstock. When Danny realised this, he could hardly believe it. Grigory, the man he and Yvonne had so trusted, had been unmasked as a traitor. If only he could get his hands around this traitor's neck, he thought. But his anger at Miasnikov was eclipsed by his concern for Yvonne. 'Where is she?' he kept asking Grigory, who insisted no harm would come to her, which was plausible given that Miasnikov needed Yvonne and Danny alive if he were to collect his ransom.

Still, Danny was worried sick. Just as Yvonne had seen glimpses of him being abused, he had seen her being dragged off, heard her screams. Both of them were relieved when, at a railroad crossing, the Mercedes stopped and the Zil caught up and stopped a few feet behind. (As did the Lada Niva, the meek and terrified Markson having been ordered by Miasnikov to follow behind the other two cars.) At that moment, Yvonne and Danny finally could see each other again. Each made a waving gesture with their hand. Thank God, Danny thought.

They'd been separated for a number of reasons, including ease of handling and the inability to be able to fabricate any information for which the kidnappers would ask.

But, mostly, it was to instill a greater sense of fear in each. Yvonne was especially vulnerable, since no one in the Zil could speak English, and even if they could, had been told not to say a word about the ransom plot; that was for Miasnikov to do, alone. She did, however, realise as much when, at the railroad crossing, Oleg got out of the Mercedes and walked over to the Zil. He spoke briefly to the driver, then leaned into the car and barked unintelligibly at Yvonne, who could make out only the words 'Money! Money!' He then returned to the Mercedes, and the two cars moved along again.

'Where are you taking us?' Danny asked Grigory, who said nothing. The men to Danny's left and right twisted his arms tighter behind him, making him groan.

Daylight was fading in the gray sky. It was only the beginning of the nightmare.

It was, I now knew, a kidnapping. But who were the kidnappers? A gang? The Mob? Were we random targets, or was it planned? Was Grigory kidnapped too? The fear came over me like a sheet of ice. Just before Danny disappeared again, I saw what looked to be a gun being pointed at the back of his neck. I asked the men in the Zil if I had in fact seen a gun. 'Dah. Gun,' one of them said. As if to keep up with their brethren in the other car, the man to my left took out his own gun, and the one to my right unfurled a knife and held it to my neck. They held me intractably by the arms and around the neck. I could barely move or breathe.

Clumsily, they tried to maintain a pretense that they were actually keeping me safe. They would tell me in their pidgin English that the driver was 'militia' or 'police.' I imagine they did this as a way to keep me from resisting. Not that I could have. In my state of

shock, my body had shut down. I felt like I had on the night George was killed in our driveway. I grew very cold and shaky. Nothing made sense in my head. My stomach was in knots. I felt as if I would become violently sick at any minute. They must have thought so, too. So afraid was I that the guy with the gun had an itchy trigger finger that I pointed to my stomach and said, 'Baby … baby,' thinking that they wouldn't kill me if they thought I was pregnant. But they just thought I was making a motion that I was about to vomit. One pointed to the floor of the car.

'Be sick!' he said. Instead, I just went limp and waited, for what I had no idea.

After about forty minutes, the mystery of where we were going ended when the Zil rolled through a neighborhood of one- and two-level homes that were, by Russian standards, upper-class havens, but by Western standards were monuments to white trash. In the middle of one block, we turned into a driveway and drove through an open, ten-foot-high iron gate. Grigory's Mercedes was already parked there, and behind the Zil came Richard Markson in his Lada Niva—I'm sure still dumbfounded by what he had seen happen but too petrified to question what was happening before his eyes. With all three cars on the property, one of the men in the Zil jumped out and closed the gate, which made a harrowing, clanging noise, like a jail cell being slammed shut.

Taken out of the car, still clutching my handbag—which I held on to the whole time, perhaps for some semblance of security—I stood before a sight that would haunt me forever: the dacha that would indeed be my prison cell. It was two stories high, a solid brick mausoleum, and in terrible disrepair. Construction work evidently had been going on; there were planks of wood and loose bricks strewn all over the grounds. As if from out of an Edgar Allan Poe novel, dogs barked hysterically in the backyard.

As I was led up the walkway, the front door opened. On the other side was hell.

When the door closed behind me, I felt swallowed up by a dark and dank still life. Windows were sealed, thin curtains drawn shroud-like around them. The foyer and living room were lit with an eerie harshness by a single light bulb on the ceiling. My hands still held behind me, I was roughly led into a small room with uncovered twin beds jammed against opposite walls.

Against the back wall was an old brownish-red sofa, on which I

was told to sit.

As I sank into that old couch, my head was spinning. If Danny was in this hell house, where was he? Where was Miasnikov? Why wouldn't anybody tell me what was happening?

I thought of running out of the room, out of the house, but just then an old woman with gray hair wearing a housecoat and slippers came into the room with a fairly well-dressed younger woman, her black hair tied back tightly behind her head. Both sat down on the sofa, and the younger woman, whom the old lady called Marusia, asked me if I would like some tea. Vacantly, I answered yes, and they left again, returning in a few minutes with Marusia carrying a cup and saucer, which she handed to me. All I could think to do was stick the cup under my nose and sniff. If the tea was poisoned, maybe I could smell it.

The old lady—a classic 'babushka,' as Russians call a grandmother, and as I would come to identify her since no one ever called her by name—took the cup and poured a small bit into the saucer. She then sipped from the saucer with a slurping sound, to indicate the tea was okay to drink. She handed the cup back to me. What's this, tea before dying? I thought, lifting it to my mouth. I drank some, and when Marusia stayed with me, I turned to her for answers.

'You are Marusia?' I said. She nodded. She spoke no English and I very little Russian. I remembered the word charasho—a way of asking if everything is going to be okay. 'Charasho?' I pleaded, 'Charasho?' She kept on nodding yes, and I kept on wanting to believe her. She did have a comforting way about her, and she promptly went into the kitchen and brought me a plate with barely-edible-looking food on it: a cold lamb chop, cold french fries, and a slice of cucumber, not that I had any appetite. But her efforts to put me at ease were interrupted by the crude sound of a thump and then a man howling in pain, coming from somewhere upstairs.

Oh my God, I thought. That's Danny! What are they doing to him? That cold chill ripped through my veins again. I wanted to run out of the room and go to Danny, but then a moment later, I was stunned to see Danny, still wearing his overcoat, being ushered into the room by two more of those thuggish men dressed in black pants and black knit shirts, who were nearly identical and quite possibly brothers, one of them very overweight. The first thing I noticed was a red bruise on Danny's forehead. But while he was pale and shaken, he walked surely and steadily to where I was sitting. I drew myself up, and he threw his arms around me, whereupon I unconsciously recoiled from him, not because of Danny, but because, out of fear, I'd erected a wall around my emotions and my person. I didn't want to be

touched; I just wanted to get out of that house.

Danny had apparently been given only a few minutes with me, to tell me the bare facts of why we'd been abducted.

'This is the deal,' he said, his voice quiet but his words blunt. 'We have to come up with one point six million dollars within three days, or they'll hang us. It has to do with the fertiliser deal in Vladivostok.'

For whatever reason, my initial reaction was not fear or shock. It was to remember Matthew Hurd's threat when we sacked him, which I had so easily dismissed. Now, his seething words flooded back into my head: 'I'm going to crucify you!' At this point, I didn't put two and two together about Grigory Miasnikov—whom I still wasn't sure had not been kidnapped along with us. 'That bastard Matthew!' I spat out. 'I'm sure he started this whole thing. If I could just see him now, I'd kill him!'

I was allowed to say no more. The fat brother grabbed my arm roughly, forcibly took me from the room, and walked me up the staircase to another dimly lit cave of a room, an open lounge area with a silver-and-black patterned couch against the rear wall. As soon as I walked in, my eyes were captured by the outline of two figures seated at a matching couch across the room. Focusing on them, I recognised Grigory Miasnikov. Just as in the Mercedes, he sat next to that nauseating hulk Oleg. If Grigory was in any trouble, he certainly seemed not to be bothered. In fact, he seemed rather comfortable. After I was told to sit on the couch, Oleg began chattering in Russian at me. Grigory, as usual, translated, but spoke in such a wan voice that I could not hear him.

'I can't hear you!' I barked impudently, it having now dawned on me that Grigory was no innocent bystander in this plot. Irrationally, my emotions now turned angry. And I wanted some answers. 'Come and sit next to me,' I said. He reluctantly got up, crossed the room, and sat down. 'Grigory, did you know this was going to happen?' I asked.

Looking almost contrite, he uttered softly, 'Yes.'

'Did you organise it?'

'No.'

Grigory was always a very cool customer who never let on too much of what he knew. But, now, I could tell he was lying through his teeth.

Oleg apparently had heard enough of our chit-chat. He seemed to be thinking, 'Who's the captive here, anyway?' It was a look that led me to wonder if perhaps the big-talking Miasnikov was in fact the brains of the operation or just a toady for this comic-book thug Oleg, who strode across the room and ripped my handbag out of my tight grip. He took the bag back with him to the other couch and spilled the

contents. Finding a small plastic container with about a hundred dollars in American bills, he slipped it into his pocket, then dumped the rest back in the bag and threw it in my lap.

He looked at me, his eyes burning, and motioned 'get up,' his lower lip snarling. I could tell that fiddling with my purse was just the prelude to something far more frightening. He directed me to an adjoining, smaller room. Having taken off my purple coat in the steamy heat that made the house seem like a furnace, I was wearing a white T-shirt, a pair of black sweatpants, and sneakers as I tread across the wood floor toward the small, unlit room. I had barely gotten through the doorway when I caught just a glimpse of Oleg raising an open hand—too late to avoid the stinging slap to one side of my face, then the other. I sank to the floor, my vision flickering, too stunned to cry out.

Looking up, I saw Oleg gripping in his hands a thin wooden stick with nails embedded in it, apparently taken from the garbage pile of the construction work. He pulled me from the floor by my right elbow and swung the stick, which cracked against my thigh, then on the back of my other arm. Feeling those rusty nail heads dig into my flesh, I wailed loudly, only to feel his fist crashing hard into the pit of my stomach, knocking the wind out of me and sending me to the floor again, clutching my middle and writhing in searing pain.

Trying to regain my breath and my senses, I could hear what sounded like Marusia's voice bellowing from out in the hallway to Oleg to stop hitting me. Looking annoyed, he left me on the floor while he walked back into the larger room and turned up the volume on an old television set to drown out her cries. He then came back and slapped me around some more. All I could do was lie there, covering my head with my forearms, as his hand pounded my arms, shoulders, and back. When he at last stopped, he squeezed my arm and pulled me up to my feet, which were now bare, my shoes having come off while I was being dragged around. Oleg walked me out of the lounge and down the stairs, past the kitchen, until we came to a dirty crawlspace behind the kitchen where there was a trapdoor on the floor. He opened it to reveal a cellar—more like a pit—maybe six feet by six feet, which apparently was used as a food storage bin since an empty potato sack lay on the ground.

'No! No! Not in there!' I protested, but, not wanting to feel the crack of that stick, I climbed slowly down a tiny ladder and slithered into the hole. Oleg didn't wait for me to get settled inside before slamming shut the trapdoor, which hit me on the forehead as I was turning my body around, leaving a bump that I could feel growing. It was black as tar inside there, and numbingly cold. Smaller than a jail cell, it was in every sense a rat hole, only far too inhumane for a rat to

live in.

The door opened a few minutes later. It was Marusia, who handed me my coat—that wonderful purple coat I had bought with Wendy Rayman, laughingly saying I'd need it to survive my first Russian winter. Now, I wrapped my freezing body in it and sat, my legs curled under me, in the dark. I looked at the luminescent dial of my wristwatch. It was 5pm.

THE BABUSHKA'S NOOSE

After five hours, the kidnapping part of the plot had worked without a hitch. Earlier, when the Weinstocks had arrived at the dacha, Grigory Miasnikov had taken care of a possible loose thread in Richard Markson, who had not known of the kidnapping plan yet had seen everything happen before his startled eyes from his Lada Niva. This could have been a monumental slip-up by Miasnikov—who could have told Markson to rest easy on this Sunday, that he would pick up the couple at the airport. Markson, though, was such a meddlesome brown-noser that Grigory couldn't ditch the young man. Besides, Richard had picked up Yvonne and Danny in the past; they might have been skeptical if he wasn't there today.

In the wake of the kidnapping, Grigory had to 'explain' things to Markson. Fortunately for Grigory, Richard was utterly petrified of him, and Miasnikov exercised his Svengali-like power over him by ordering him to follow the two cars to the dacha in Noginsk. Then, he told Richard to unload the Weinstocks' luggage, go to his apartment in Moscow, remain there and not come out until further notice. Richard of course obeyed, though Grigory had to wonder if even Markson would do as he was told forever. At least for the next few days, Grigory arranged for some goons to sit outside Richard's apartment around the clock. If they saw him step outside, they would do some 'explaining' as well.

Danny, meanwhile, like Yvonne, was undergoing the kind of physical and psychological torture that was more suited to serious criminal and political prisoners. At one point during that first evening, Yvonne and Danny noticed the 'babushka' perched on a stepladder, nailing a piece of rope that looked like a noose above a doorway at the rear of the kitchen. They couldn't help but notice that the old lady was working slowly, meticulously, steadily, as though she'd hung up a few nooses in her day.

Another time, sitting in the upstairs lounge, Danny observed that

the walls were bare except for a religious icon. He was told that if someone sits under that icon, no harm would come to him. For what possible reason would he be told this? He wondered. Were there some people in this haunted house populated by both sleazy-looking thugs and respectable-looking women with young children who were sympathetic to him and Yvonne, and who might help them escape? Or was that what he was supposed to think? He didn't know, but in succeeding days, he would gravitate to the spot under the icon. Why not? Anything that might help …

The thug known as Oleg, though, was anything but sympathetic. After Yvonne had been taken to the cellar, Oleg approached Danny in the lounge and ordered, 'Stayat' ('Stand up'). When he did, Oleg grabbed him by his hair while another thug chopped with his hand, karate-style, at the back of his neck. While Danny instinctively reached for his neck, the captor viciously kneed him in the groin. Danny crumpled to the floor, grabbing for his genitals and doubling over as if he had been cut in half.

Danny was wearing jeans, thick black socks, sneakers, and a business shirt over a Surfer's Paradise T-shirt. When he had recovered from the knee in the groin, he was told to take off his shoes, whereupon Oleg kicked them through a wooden railing atop the stairway and down to the ground floor. He was then taken downstairs and in his stocking feet passed a group of men—including Grigory—sitting at the kitchen table, fully laden with meat, vodka, soft drinks, and expensive crystal glasses. Two men held his elbows tightly and dragged him into another of the endless rooms in the house, one with a dirty wooden floor. Here, Oleg began beating him with a hollow metal tube that appeared to be the hose of a vacuum cleaner. Others joined in, kicking at his midsection. Oleg continued battering him so hard that the top part of the tube flew into the air.

Danny, his body now almost completely covered with bruises, curled up on the ground, holding his glasses into his stomach, hoping and praying for the punishment to end. When it finally abated, he was dragged to the crawlspace. Oleg lifted the trapdoor in the floor and pushed him down the rickety ladder. Yvonne, already in the cellar, was hopeful when she saw light enter the dark hole, but after Danny slid in, Oleg kicked the door shut again. The two of them could barely fit in the cold space. They huddled together for warmth, trembling, shuddering, saying nothing.

Danny, feeling around in the dark with his hands, found the empty potato sack and laid it on the concrete floor under them. He also found a piece of cardboard, also laying it on the floor. Yvonne positioned herself partly against Danny and partly against the ladder. Without shoes, Danny's toes began to feel numb. He could not move

his left arm. Both of them were shivering, hungry, and tired. Would they make it through the night?

Danny and I didn't say anything to each other. We couldn't. We were too disconnected from reality to even know what to say. The shock of it all had shut us both down. So for three hours, we lay in this makeshift freezer, barefooted, our arms around each other, trying to create warmth. I thought about our children, how they would be worried sick when we didn't call them tonight, and about survival. I considered myself a tough-edged person, as had many others, but survival as an abused wife or a high-powered businesswoman was one thing; survival in a freezing Russian cellar with killers only feet away was quite another.

We both assumed that the mobsters wanted to keep us alive, given that they needed us to get them their money. Clearly, these were professional criminals; they knew exactly what they were doing. They wanted to dispense 'just enough pain' without crossing the line to lethal punishment. For all the abuse we'd taken, no one drugged us, and no one had hit me hard enough to leave permanent marks. The bruises stung, but were of the type that would heal over a day or two.

Still, how could we know for sure what their motives were? What if we couldn't adapt to the cold in this subterranean pit? What if one of us went into shock, had a seizure or a heart attack? I remember thinking that in the movies people who get trapped in the extreme cold are wont to tell each other, 'Let's not fall asleep. Let's try to stay awake.' That was about as much survival training as I had, but it seemed a good idea. Danny and I kept our eyes open in the dark; if we fell asleep, we didn't know if we would wake up or just freeze.

At the same time, at least in here we couldn't be beaten any more. It was obvious that these black-clad gorillas' idea was to condition us to anticipate pain, to destroy any defenses we may have had. It was as much psychological as physical torture, and I could only wonder how far it would go. They hadn't even gotten down to asking us how we could get them their $1.6 million. When they did, they would want us to practically be able to throw the money at them.

After three hours in the 'cooler,' the door opened, and as we squinted as light from the kitchen washed over our eyes, three of the gangsters pulled only me out of the hole. They led me to another empty room on the ground floor. There, Oleg held a metal hose in one hand, beating it against his open hand. As one man pulled my coat off me, I instinctively recoiled—I had been trying to put out of my head

and my fears the obvious possibility that these barbaric men who had not the slightest respect for women would assault me sexually, or even rape me. Now, I was petrified it was going to happen.

Oleg slapped my face and then punched me in the stomach. The latter blow propelled me backwards, and I buckled to the floor. My head struck the hardwood, and I briefly lost consciousness. When I came to, four men were holding me down, securing my legs and arms. I was sure this was when they would molest me, so it was almost a relief when they lifted me up, even though they began to kick me all over my buttocks and my legs.

In the midst of this brutality, I again caught sight of the squat, bespectacled man I thought I'd known so well—Grigory Miasnikov, who was leaning against a window sill, his arms characteristically folded at his chest, passively watching the entire brutal scene. While I had by now figured out that Grigory was a rat and a traitor, I could also discern that he was playing a con game, acting as if he too were a victim of the gang and being held along with us. In truth, he was a terrible actor. But I believed I could use that sham to my advantage, to deflect Oleg and his band from battering me.

Squatting on the floor dodging kicks, I looked up at Oleg.

'Why aren't you punching Grigory, too?' I asked. 'Why are you only beating me?'

The question seemed to catch Grigory off guard, and Oleg, as was his habit whenever I said anything in English, demanded that Grigory translate it. Dutifully, Grigory did. Oleg thought a minute, then woofed something in Russian to his men. Two of them then walked over to Grigory and began half-heartedly grabbing at him and making punching gestures. On his part, Grigory tried to look like he was in pain, completely unconvincingly.

Oleg, as he had when I confronted Grigory upstairs on his role in the kidnapping, quickly tired of this farce. Again he rained blows on my back and shoulders with the hose. Then, seemingly winded, he stopped. Finally, he was ready to get to the heart of the matter.

With Grigory translating, he said, 'Doomai! Doomai! [Think! Think!] Where can you get the money? We need to get the money.'

Still writhing in pain on the floor, I could only blurt out, 'We know some very wealthy people overseas, in America. Let us contact them; they will pay the money.'

I thought it curious that these people—especially with Grigory's knowledge of our business setup—wouldn't at the outset bring up that we had bank accounts in Melbourne, Hong Kong, and Russia. Why hadn't they simply demanded that Danny and I make a call to Alan, the accountant in Hong Kong? Could it have been that Grigory, possibly in consultation with that other sewer rat, Matthew Hurd,

knew that our accounts had been looted so devastatingly that we actually had very little cash in them, and had learned since October what being leveraged and mortgaged meant? If so, trying to convince them that a large amount of money was under our control would have been counterproductive. Recalling that Grigory, while he visited us in Melbourne, had gotten us to talk about our 'rich' relatives in America, I decided I would go that route. It was evidently what Oleg wanted to hear. For now, it seemed he no longer had a desire to beat me. He motioned for me to stand up and for his men to take me back to the cellar. I reached for my coat.

'No coat!' Oleg yelled. 'Leave coat here.'

Clutching my handbag, still barefoot and now without a wrap, I once again was marched to that cold hole in the ground. There, reunited with Danny, my bruises throbbing, I lay flat, my head in his lap.

After about an hour, they came again, for both of us. Again, there was relief as the warmth of the house spread through me. We were told to sit at the kitchen table, bare now except for a bowl of fruit. It seemed that business, not beating, was on the menu.

Grigory was sitting in one chair, nibbling on an apple. Oleg sat in another, apparently much more amenable to our needs. When Marusia came in, I asked her to get my coat. She looked to Oleg. He nodded yes. Maybe now, I thought, he would be a human being and not a monster.

Wasting no time, he got right to the $1.6 million. Through Grigory, he said, 'When can we get it?'

Danny answered first. 'I know you want money,' he said gruffly, 'but we've been travelling for thirty hours. We're exhausted. We need to rest.'

I could tell this answer would not suit Oleg, so I quickly spoke up. 'Let us contact as many people as possible. Again, we know wealthy people in America. We can get it done.'

That was far more palatable. Oleg said a few quiet words in Russian to Grigory, who told us, 'You will not be beaten any more tonight.' He added, still weakly trying to keep to the pretense of being in trouble with us, 'They have allowed me to go home for the night. You will sleep here, in a comfortable bed. Tomorrow I will come back, and we will talk more about the money.'

It actually seemed like a civilised arrangement. But before he strode out of the house, Grigory put a chilling punctuation mark on the dreadful day.

'You will remain here until the money is paid, or else we will hang you.'

Undoubtedly, he realised instantly that using the word we ripped

the pretense away from his act. For all intents and purposes, Miasnikov was them—the enemy. He didn't really seem to care that we knew it.

Danny and I spent the last hours of January 6th in an upstairs bedroom. Marusia walked us up and then took me into a bathroom to wash up. In the harsh bathroom light, the bruises on my arms were grotesque. The angry welts seemed like red checkers on a grid of black and blue track marks. Seeing them, Marusia gasped, then she gently swabbed the wounds with a wet washcloth.

It was almost midnight on a day that was already longer than eternity. Though I was no less petrified, I was also weary to the bone. I got into the bed where Danny was already lying, fully clothed, as was I. Marusia had brought up two cups of black tea. Having eaten not a morsel of food since a snack on the plane an hour out of Belgrade—twelve hours ago—we should have been famished, but neither of us could have held down any solid food; terror had numbed our appetites. But we forced ourselves to drink the tea, which was sickly sweet and went down like tar.

At least we were out of that blasted hole. With our luggage having been placed in the bedroom, we found socks to thaw our frozen feet. We also laid out our slippers—which would be all we would be allowed to wear from here on in.

We kept the light on in the room, not wanting to be lost in darkness. If someone came in, we wanted to know who it was and what he might be carrying. We lay our heads on the pillows, but our eyes did not close. We stared at the ceiling, reliving the horrors of the past twelve hours. We knew we would never fall asleep.

9

DAY TWO: TUESDAY, JANUARY 7th, THE DACHA

Even if we could have unwound enough to sleep, Oleg's band of brigands made it impossible to do so. All night long, they loitered in the lounge next to the bedroom, sitting around smoking, swilling vodka, watching television at ear-splitting levels, and cackling like roosters. There were no doors to either room, only a flimsy split-cloth strip like one would see in a Japanese restaurant, and their sounds and smells seemed to be right in the room with us. They had taken quilts and cushions from the bedroom to sleep on the floor there, but mainly they were there to keep us under watch. Every few minutes, one of them would pull open the cloth to check on us, as if they believed we were super heroes who could somehow escape.

The worst moment that long night was when one of them crept into the bedroom at about 3am and sidled up to my side of the bed, sticking his face inches from mine. I could smell the vodka on his breath, and his mustache was flicking my ear as he whispered something unintelligible but probably very disgusting in Russian. My heart began pounding furiously, in fear that this squat, hideous man seemed to be making a sexual advance. Danny, whom I'm sure heard it, likely had to strain to keep from tearing the guy's throat out, knowing how powerless both of us were to stop anything these men wanted to do. But, fortunately, having gotten his jollies, the homunculus then stumbled out of the room.

Danny and I looked at each other, saying nothing, aware that there were too many ears right outside the room eavesdropping on us —and perhaps looking for an excuse to come in and stomp us again. We just resumed our coffin-like pose of death, lying motionless, waiting for something unspeakable to happen.

They both could hardly move, let alone think. It was as if a train had hit them. And if the men wouldn't do them in, they were sure the

bloody heat would. This bedroom surely was the hottest room in the house. The heating was not properly installed; heat was not evenly dispersed around the house. Some rooms felt as cold as a meat locker; others were hot enough for the wallpaper to peel. All the windows were closed tightly, as if sealed like a tomb. They could not get out of bed. They could not even speak to, look at, or touch each other. It was a good feeling that they were together and not being kept separately, but Danny felt guilty that such a thing could happen to a wife that he was supposed to protect from harm.

In particular, as a woman, Yvonne was in the most immediate danger, as Russians do not respect women. Yet as Danny lay there, he kept thinking how remarkable a woman Yvonne was. He could not believe her courage. She was the reason he kept repeating the Hebrew phrase to himself 'Chazak V'Ematz' over and over during the entire ordeal. It was the motto of his old school, Mt. Scopus College in Burwood, Melbourne. It means: 'Be strong and of good courage.'

The women were not allowed into the lounge with the men. Besides the babushka and Marusia, I had seen several other women, as well as small and teenage children around the house. Whoever among them was still there had gone to bed. Indeed, the entire atmosphere of the dacha was as darkly surreal as any Fellini movie. Here were people going about their mundane business, carrying out normal family living, yet seemed not to blink twice that the two strangers in their midst were being held and beaten. Such a happenstance barely seemed to distract the women from their cooking and cleaning. For the babushka, nailing up a noose was evidently just another of her chores, like ironing or sweeping.

Even so, for a woman of her 'eclectic' tastes, the old hag could be pleasant and hospitable. After the sun came up that morning, and most of the men had finally gone to bed, she came into the bedroom bearing a tray with tea and fruit. 'Cooshet. Cooshet,' she said ('Eat. Eat').

In the light, I could see that while she was old, this woman was hale and ruddy-skinned, and had beautiful piercing blue eyes and a vibrant smile that displayed a mouth full of gold teeth—which fed my curiosity about whom she and these other people were. In Russia, only the wealthy could afford gold teeth, so she was not a peasant. Her eyes offered clues, too. Very few Russians have blue eyes and dark skin.

I didn't know who they were. But I knew they weren't common,

garden-variety Russians.

THE CHECHEN CONNECTION

Such traits were common among the people of the old Soviet slave-states that interlock along the underbelly of South Asia from the Caspian Sea on the west to the Chinese border on the east. Some were well-known in their past incarnations, such as Georgia, Latvia, Estonia, Armenia, and Lithuania, but others with nearly unpronounceable names such as Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Tadjikistan (Grigory Miasnikov's birthplace) came out of the darkness when they were made independent republics in June 1991, when Russian president Boris Yeltsin broke apart the old Soviet Union and formed the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Not all those satellite states were as fortunate. Another, Chechnya, also claimed sovereignty in 1991, but Yeltsin resisted and would send in Russian troops to quell the insurrection. That would lead to a twenty-month war that claimed 100,000 Chechen lives and thousands of Russian soldiers. It would also incubate some of the world's most bloodthirsty terrorists.

Yvonne and Danny, like most of the world, knew or cared little about these geopolitical developments and did not have any inkling of how they might be related to their kidnapping. It would take time for those pieces to fit together. Yet the fact that these people all around them seemed to be not exclusively ex-KGB agents or henchmen from the Moscow mob but rather a mélange of divergent forces that included churlish 'gypsies' with a whole different agenda could have meant that the Weinstocks were a 'new' kind of hostage.

If so, no one could have known at the time just what atrocities had been spawned in the crucible of Chechnya. Actually, the seeds were planted earlier, when the Russians attempted to occupy Afghanistan in the late 1970s, emboldening Afghan rebels in the name of extreme Islamic fundamentalism—a movement that soon attracted the attention of a certain Saudi Arabian 'businessman' born into a family fortune, Osama bin Laden. In time, a blueprint was drawn up for financing the rebels' bloody new methods of terrorism. A popular tactic was kidnapping and extorting for ransom wealthy Western businessmen. A decade later, the Chechens had read the blueprint and were seeking targets of opportunity. In retrospect, few could have seemed juicier or more inviting than Yvonne and Danny Weinstock.

When the babushka put the tray down, she lingered in the bedroom, looking as if she wanted to tell us something. Then, she extended a crooked index finger and brought it up to her neck in an obvious throat-slashing pantomime—but not because she was threatening us, it seemed. Instead, she kept on repeating, 'Miasnikov! Miasnikov!' with those beautiful blue eyes afire in anger. No, we decided, she wasn't threatening us; she was warning us. She was telling us to beware of Miasnikov!

To be sure, Grigory's feeble attempts to play victim had only convinced Danny and I that he was in on the plot. But if the babushka's crude sign language could be believed—and she was, after all, a woman who seemingly relished nailing up nooses in her home—did it mean that Grigory and Oleg were not quite brothers in arms? Was there bad blood between the two? Though Miasnikov was—like the babushka and the interrelated members of the clan at the dacha—not purebred Russians by birth, there were numerous schisms between them, culturally and in their respective agendas. If Grigory and/or Mr Rud had hired the gang because they were appropriately both dumb as doorknobs and cold-blooded as a firing squad, they may have miscalculated the depth of resentment and distrust they would have for Grigory. If so, the babushka, the matriarch of the dacha, may have wanted to lay blame on Miasnikov, the outsider, in advance, in case things blew up on them.

Then, too, if Oleg—as we suspected—was the harpy's son, he may have communicated to her his own gripes about Grigory. If Oleg was a crime boss, he would have been a man used to calling the shots and not being questioned. Could this unwashed, Zorba-like character have tolerated taking orders from the prim and proper faux Russian businessman in a suit and tie—and who was as devious as Oleg?

Of course, we couldn't have known at that stage which side of the divide was worse, Grigory's or Oleg's. And we were hardly about to trust either. Not yet, not twenty-four hours after the kidnapping went down. Now, the notion of a cleavage between the two 'bosses' was no more than a fanciful straw to grasp at. Still, it was something we would keep in the back of our minds. Down the road, perhaps, the straw might turn into a lifeline.

In the early afternoon of day two, the two protagonists—possibly antagonists—met up again. Oleg had awakened at around 11am, and

when Grigory arrived at the house at 12:30, they spoke in the kitchen for half an hour before they had Danny brought down to the dining room, where the three of them sat at a long table, Grigory being there, according to the farce they were playing out, only as an interpreter. Although the men who came for Danny told me to stay put in the bedroom, I was able to wander out onto the landing atop the stairs. With most of the goons also downstairs, and the ones in the lounge still asleep, I could hear every word of the discussion, which began with Danny trying to put the scowling Oleg at ease. Danny tried some small talk, but with a clear purpose.

'Are you Russian?' he asked through Grigory.

'We are gypsies, not Russians,' came the reply.

Danny mentioned an old gypsy folk song he knew called 'Tizigane.'

'Yes, 'Tizigane,'' Oleg said, though the word came out sounding like 'Tizi-chane.' This was useful for us because people from the 'republics' spoke in this dialect. Later, too, we would hear Oleg ask for a 'chg-arette.' So, at least we now knew with whom we were dealing. It would have been frightening enough to be held by a man like Grigory, especially if he was indeed trained in army intelligence methods. But were these 'gypsies' going to understand the intricacies of raising a million dollars on short notice, or be in any mood to wait beyond a day or two for it?

When the men had come for Danny, they had rifled through our belongings for any useful information. They handed Oleg my wallet, which contained four credit cards.

'You have money,' he said through Grigory. 'You have all these credit cards.'

'They are not all credit cards,' Danny said, checking them on the table. 'This is a library card. This is a hotel discount card.'

'But this one is an American Express card. You have money. You have American Express.'

'No, we had an American Express card. The account was canceled last year. We owe $25,000 to American Express. Call them, check for yourself.'

'Why does your wife carry all these cards when she can't use them?'

Danny must have laughed to himself hearing that and thought that these jokers don't have a clue about what makes Western women tick. 'Who can explain what a woman carries in her handbag?' he said jovially. 'We are here for two weeks, so she carries everything.'

Oleg then changed course unexpectedly, with a stunning revelation. 'We have sent a team to Australia,' he said, 'to speak with Mr Hurd. He says that you have money in secret bank accounts in

Hong Kong.'

Aha! So now it was out in the open. No more speculation was needed. I was right—Matthew, that rat, was in on all this, up to his neck. He had obviously intended to make good on his threat to 'crucify' us, if he hadn't actually set us up from the start. He kept his bobo, Grigory, briefed about the financial particulars of Video Technology. Worse, knowing how paltry our liquid capital was, he had spoon-fed Grigory and our captors fabrications about us having secret bank accounts—a subject, as we would find out, he could speak about quite facilely—to keep the kidnappers salivating and eager to go through with their plot.

I could tell by his delay in responding that Danny was a bit stunned. Then he said, 'We have no secret bank accounts in Hong Kong or anywhere else.'

'We know your father purchased a factory in Melbourne,' Oleg went on. 'You used some of the money you made from the fertiliser deal to do this.'

That was, of course, another tidbit of information provided by Matthew, though again willfully misstated. And it revealed something we hadn't realised—that when Mr Rud spoke of the bad fertiliser deal at the Sputnik Hotel in September, he had not believed that Danny and I had lost all that money at all, and that by the time he had informed us of the problem, we had actually pocketed the $1.6 million and contrived the story of the bad deal.

Not that there was a shred of evidence about that—never mind that Danny and I were hardly good enough actors to have feigned the shock we had displayed when we learned about the queered deal. The truth was clear: This bogus charge could only have been meant to bolster the case for ransom. To the simpleminded Oleg, it was the only thing he needed to know.

Exasperated with another of Matthew's lies, but keeping his cool, Danny addressed the charge.

'That is not true at all. My father had his own money to do that. And, in fact, he had to borrow most of it through a bank.'

Oleg pressed on using a similar tack, no doubt fortified by Grigory's photographs. 'We know you bought a house for one million dollars. You used our money to buy this house.'

Though we had tried to set Grigory straight about the 'luxurious' house on his 'sightseeing' trip, Danny went through it again, about how we borrowed $700,000 from the bank and had a $9000 monthly mortgage payment on the house.

Oleg though was just as dense in understanding it all. 'How can you do this? We do not believe you,' he said through Grigory. Danny explained again, making some headway.

‘Banka creditna?’ Oleg asked.

‘Dah,’ Danny said.

Still, Oleg wouldn’t budge on his contention that we ‘owed’ $1.6 million. Danny tried to point out that we had never received that money—which Miasnikov surely knew, but not Oleg. ‘You will not like what I have to say,’ Danny told Oleg, ‘but this is the situation as I understand it,’ reiterating the matter of the broken bags and that only $400,000 had been received in the Hong Kong account—and of this, only $40,000 was left after meeting costs on shipping, commissions, insurance, repacking, and so on.

‘If an extra million dollars did exist,’ he concluded, ‘it’s in the hands of Matthew Hurd. He set up the original contracts. He negotiated the sale. He went to Taiwan.’

Oleg wasn’t buying it. ‘Nyet. Matthew Hurd told us that you have money in secret bank accounts in Hong Kong. You have our money. Give it to us. There is at least one million dollars somewhere.’

Danny was down to our last option, the one I had used the night before. ‘If you want the money,’ he said, ‘let us contact people in America who will get it for you.’

Again, that seemed to be the magic words for Oleg. Both Danny and I had all but promised that America could lay golden eggs for this two-bit hoodlum. But I had been the one who had mentioned it first. Perhaps, Oleg thought, I knew more.

Gesturing to one of his lackeys outside the dining room, he said, in Russian, ‘Bring Mrs Weinstock here.’

So, now it was my turn to sit at the table. When I got down to the dining room, Oleg was saying something in Russian, but before Grigory could translate, Danny turned to me and began to fill me in about what had transpired. He said, ‘We were discussing—’ but before he could go on, Oleg, looking unstrung, cut him off.

‘Don’t talk!’ he bellowed.

Apparently, Danny, without knowing it, had violated the twisted criminal etiquette of this lunatic mob, which was that one was forbidden to interrupt Oleg while he was speaking. A wee bit late for Danny, we had to be made aware in no uncertain terms that we were not to communicate with each other while we were in Oleg’s presence, unless we were told to.

Oleg had been holding a thick, two-inch-wide black leather belt in his hand, wrapped around his palm, the buckle dangling ominously. He had seemingly been chomping at the bit to use it—and Danny’s impertinence gave him the excuse. In the blink of an eye, he shot up, toppling over his chair, bolted over to Danny, and lashed him with the belt, which made a crack when it burrowed into Danny’s arm just above the elbow. Danny screamed and tried to reach across with his

other arm when Oleg grabbed him by the throbbing elbow, picked him up, and pushed him through the kitchen, to be deposited again in that wretched cellar.

What would happen to me now? When he returned to the dining room, he was looking positively maniacal. Instead of sitting down, he stood above me, banging the leather strap rhythmically on the table. And, now, three of his men had come in and were standing right behind my chair, ready to receive orders.

I looked at Grigory; he was, as ever, impassive, almost bored. I thought, What a bastard he is, and waited for the worst to happen. However, Oleg was controlled and contained, interested only in our finances. He asked, through Grigory, about the credit cards in my wallet. Having heard Danny's answers to the same question, I essentially repeated it, saying, 'I carry everything in my handbag, in case I need something, even credit cards that are no longer good.'

'What do you know about the fertiliser deal?'

Once more, I echoed Danny, but as I did, I looked at Grigory. He, of course, knew all about the fertiliser deal; he was there when Mr Rud told us about it. And yet, he seemed to be as anxious for the answer as was Oleg. Could it be, I wondered, that he really suspected that we had bilked Mr Rud? Or was he merely playing dumb for Oleg's benefit? Whatever his angle, he looked grim. He began tapping the tips of his fingers on the table impatiently—a mime I had witnessed once before in the Chekhova Street office of SovAustralTechnicka, just before he had flown into a rage and fired an employee on the spot, in front of the entire staff.

'The fertiliser was not all good quality, and the buyer would not pay anywhere near the value of it. We did not know everything that was going on in the office because Matthew Hurd did not allow us to know.'

'Matthew! Matthew! Matthew!' Oleg exploded, angered that we were laying blame on the rat whose bull he had bought, hook, line, and sinker.

My body was trembling uncontrollably. This man was a complete psychotic. He had already shown he had no compunction about hitting a woman, and, having seen Danny bludgeoned for merely having spoken in his presence, I didn't know what other of his demented rules I would violate that would set him off again. I was frightened, dazed, worried about Danny. That belt buckle was like a watch swinging back and forth, hypnotising me.

Oleg, though, sneered at my discomfort. Grigory translated his next remarks: 'You are play acting! If you do not give us more details, or stop saying 'I don't know,' we will take you and shoot you now.'

Only he didn't ask for any more details. He was in the mood for

more sick torture. He and three of his henchmen took me into an empty space next to the dining room. They tied my hands behind my back with that horrible belt. Then, with not a second of warning, someone dropped a yellow plastic garbage bag over my head and tied it tightly around my neck.

I nearly blacked out in sheer fright. Everything went black. When I screamed, part of the bag was sucked into my throat, choking off my breathing. Feeling myself being suffocated, I was certain I was going to die. I began to conjure up thoughts about people who drown and how long it took for one to stop breathing. How long did I have?

About sixty seconds passed. I was still breathing. I was struggling to get my hands free from under the tightened belt, but it didn't budge. I knew I had only a few more seconds before oxygen would no longer reach my brain. I felt, heard, and saw the bag being ripped open, by what looked to be a Swiss Army knife being wielded by one of the goons. For a brief moment, I believed the knife was coming right at my throat. Would it slit my jugular? But the man was cutting away the bag so I could breathe freely. I was gasping for air, but, thank God, I was still alive.

Upon reflection, I realised that Oleg would not have allowed me to die, not then, not yet. We wouldn't outlive our usefulness until we had gotten that million-six to him. And yet, the chilling corollary was that, once he did get the money, the odds were that he would have to kill us. We would be able to identify him, the house, the other scoundrels involved. If we reached that point, our lives would be worth nothing.

Every minute we could stay alive was a victory.

His latest exercise in psychological torture over, Oleg now had me taken back to the bedroom. I went up the stairs, coughing, crying, worrying about Danny. As much as I was steeling myself to stay alive, one thought was always in my head: How much more of this ungodly torture would I be able to survive?

OLEG'S KNIFE

Danny was pulled out of the cellar an hour later and once more seated at the dining room table with Oleg and Grigory. He was instructed to write down all the details of the fertiliser transaction and the Weinstocks' personal finances—with a very pointed warning from Oleg.

'Mr Hurd is also preparing a report for us,' he said. 'If yours is

different, we will kill you.'

Danny asked for paper and was given a children's book in which Oleg had been doodling during the earlier interrogation. Slowly, Danny scribbled about ten pages of notes, including the banking details of the housing loan, all the while being hectored by an antsy Oleg, yelling 'Doomai!' ('Think!') again and again. It was a word Yvonne and Danny would come to dread, because it meant Oleg was especially frustrated and apt to make them suffer for it.

'Doomai!'

Danny tried to keep his wits, but found it impossible to concentrate. He was coming up empty on transactions, shipment dates, destinations, and the names of clients, etc.

'Doomai!'

Now Oleg boiled over again. He went into the kitchen and grabbed a long and frightful-looking carving knife, then came back, pointed the knife at Danny's stomach and jabbed malevolently at him with it.

'Doomai!'

Ever more frustrated, he suddenly stopped. Thinking about what would make Danny even more cowed and how he could get better information, he turned on his heel and walked out of the dining room. Gripping the knife hard, he went upstairs.

I was sitting on the bed, leaning up against a pillow and trying to recover from the bag incident when Oleg entered the room. His heavy boots booming on the wood floor, he came at me, holding a frightfully large knife. I tensed up in a crab-like position as he reached with his other hand for my right ear. Pinching it between his thumb and forefinger, it looked for all the world like he was going to cut off my ear! Though I knew that he wouldn't have let me suffocate, I knew there was no such interdiction about cutting off my ear. I recalled that years ago billionaire J. Paul Getty's grandson was kidnapped by the Italian Red Brigade, who cut off his ear and sent it to an Italian newspaper as proof they had the boy—and thereafter they were paid a $1 million ransom. And so I waited to feel the cold blade of that horrific knife.

But it didn't happen. Instead, Oleg, while squeezing my ear, began yelling, 'Money! Money!'

Desperately, I repeated what I had said downstairs: 'We have no money. We have no secret bank accounts in Hong Kong.'

I reached for my handbag and pulled out the chequebook for that

account, with the account number of our personal bank account in Hong Kong.

'This is our personal bank account,' I said. 'It has ten dollars in it. You can check it yourself.'

Believing I was trying to con him, Oleg erupted in deranged laughter. Then, with the blade turned sideways, he brought the knife up over my head and bashed me hard with it on the top of my skull. It stung like a massive hornet bite, and a bump rose from my scalp. I let out another wail, but when my eyes cleared and I looked for Oleg, he was gone, and I was alone with one of his blackhearts, a tall, particularly nasty one they called Sascha.

This man seemed to live in the same outfit, a brown, double-breasted, pin-striped suit he must have thought made him look like a gangster, and from what I could tell, he had no idea what was a shave or a bath. A permanent smirk creased his grizzled face like a disfiguring scar. Appropriately, since Oleg treated him like sludge, he was only too eager to do the gang's dirtiest jobs.

It was this germ-ridden attack dog who had come into the bedroom the night before and made me so uncomfortable. That, however, was only act one. Apparently, Oleg had let him off the leash now for act two.

As I sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing my hand over my pounding head, Sascha—'the Snake,' as we would take to calling him for his creepy, sleazy, night-crawling ways—slithered to the bed and grinned, oozing what I supposed he meant to be sexuality; instead, it was just snake oil. He began to rub my shoulders, his sausage-like fingers digging deeply into my shoulder blades. I inched away, but with an abrupt push, he had me lying spread-eagle on the bed, then he mounted me. He began thrusting his hips between my legs while pinning my upper body. However, I was more worried about the gun in his belt, which I could feel pressing against my hip bone.

Reflexively, my voice cried out, 'Danny! Danny!' And while I knew he could hear me downstairs, I also knew there'd be nothing he could do. There was nothing I could do, either. This was to be the rape I had been expecting, dreading, unsuccessfully trying to push out of my mind.

Or would it? By chance, it struck me that I had seen a plumpish woman in the house called Masha. Hoping with all my might that she was this animal's wife, I screamed, 'Masha! Masha!'

Amazingly, it worked. As soon as the name flew out, so did Sascha. Immediately, he lifted himself off of me before he could do any harm and scampered out of the room before Masha could see what he was doing.

Again, had the situation not been so grim, it might have been

amusing that a wannabe gangster who carried a gun and would likely kill on the order of Oleg became a shivering lamb at the mention of his wife's name. Rather than laugh, I breathed yet another deep sigh of relief. Thank God, I told myself.

As shaken as I was, I was pleased I had gotten the better of the Snake. It was another small victory. But, as with all of the small victories I'd had so far, it was plenty good enough for now.

A DEAD TURKEY

Downstairs, Danny won a small victory of his own when the interrogation ended and he was escorted back to the bedroom to be reunited with Yvonne. For the rest of that Tuesday, Yvonne and he were left undisturbed. By the luck of the calendar, they had caught a break.

As it happened, the next day was the start of the Russian new year. Oleg and Grigory had family matters to tend. Meanwhile, the babushka and the other women would be using the kitchen all day, cooking what would be sumptuous meals for the next day when even more people would be coming to the dacha.

Yvonne and Danny had seen how serious the brood was about their holiday meals by the gargantuan, mule-size turkey that lay dead on the floor outside the kitchen by the cellar. In the early evening, the babushka and Marusia would begin plucking and preparing the bird, and that process clearly trumped interrogating the two imprisoned Australians, even on Oleg's list of priorities.

By mid-afternoon, Grigory had gone home to his wife and children, meaning no one could have translated anyway. Upstairs, Sascha and a few other goons—family members all, Yvonne and Danny had concluded—draped themselves in front of the television in the lounge, drinking vodka and making the usual noise and periodic checks on the Weinstocks in the bedroom.

For a time, they even invited the couple in to watch with them, though Yvonne and Danny could understand little of what they were seeing. Russian New Year or not, though, their respite would be brief. Oleg and Grigory simply could not let the kidnapping stretch any longer than necessary.

The wheels had to start turning on the ransom. The interrogations would resume soon enough. When they would, the Weinstocks knew this: They had better be able to come up with better answers.

10

DAY THREE: WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 8th, THE DACHA AND MOSCOW

It was much harder for me to sleep than Danny. While he had a way of shutting things out and drifting off, my eyes refused to close. Any noise close to the room, car horns from the street, and every clang of the front gate would cause my head to jump from the pillow. Whenever I was in the room for long hours, I would hear a train running on nearby tracks. A railway station being just up the block from the house, I would pass time playing a little game, counting the minutes until I would hear the whistle blow and the train screech to a stop.

As best I could tell, the train came through no less than five times a day. I would think, God, what I would give to have a seat on that train right now. I even imagined it was the Orient Express, that I was on it, staring out of the window as the train chugged along the banks of the Blue Danube.

Though not nearly as picturesque, the scenery outside the window of the bedroom offered more escapism—even though there was not a chance of escape. The window was tiny, two feet by two feet, and covered by iron bars on the outside. It was low to the floor, and I found myself spending a good bit of time on my knees, my nose pressed to the glass, staring at the snow-blanketed street below. People would be trudging through the snow to the station. Small children romped on sleds. Old women carried bundles of groceries. Sometimes I would open the window an inch or two, so I could breathe the cold, fresh air.

Just like inside the dacha, life went on all around us on the outside. Many people walking in the street were aware we were being held. I would notice certain people regularly replace others in the same spot, as though they were taking shifts as sentries, watching up and down the block. I could only theorise that nearly everyone in the neighborhood was being paid off by Oleg to keep quiet about strange things they may see going on at the house. What those things were, I didn't really want to know.

Trapped within the depressing confines of the house, I had been

able to survey much of the two floors that were our world. The dacha itself sat in a streetscape of cookie-cutter houses straight from Fiddler on the Roof, with their broken picket fences and baying dogs. The exterior had some sort of brick extension marked by irregular design patterns and blobby cement bubbles in the brickwork. Everything was in a state of unfinished renovation. Piles of wood were strewn all over, and there were sheds stacked with building materials.

Inside the house, tackiness collided with out-of-place luxury. In different rooms, there were no less than six sofas upholstered in horribly gaudy velvet or leather. The main lounge next to our bedroom had an expensive television and video equipment that few Russians could have afforded without some connection to the Mob or the black market. There were six or more bedrooms, which I came to identify by the color of the brocade cloth that fully lined each one. Oleg's bedroom, one of four on the second floor, was pink; ours was the 'orange room,' with the brocade covering everything including the light switch, which we had to feel around in the dark to find.

None of the rooms, even the purple-wallpapered bathroom, had a door. All had hanging pieces of cloth over the archway, possibly because the doors had been removed during the renovations, or because Oleg was paranoid about not being able to know what was going on at all times in every room. The ceilings in the entire house were so cheaply plastered that some were buckling. The banisters on the stairway and around the upstairs landing were patched with unfinished planks of pine. All the workmanship was uneven, unprofessional, and lopsided. Pieces of wood had to be nailed across the corners to keep the walls from collapsing. The underground heating system would get too hot and shut down for hours at a time.

We were also becoming more familiar with the gallery of knaves populating the house. Oleg's teenage daughter, Nella, liked to pad barefoot around the halls and would bound into our room uninvited. If she knew about the beatings and why we were there, it didn't bother her. All she cared about was that she was studying English in school and could practice speaking with us. We were a great novelty for her. Yet, for all her apparent disconnect with reality—and with any sense of personal hygiene—she made me think of my own daughters. Melanie had never gone a day without hearing my voice, even when I was on a business trip. She would be upset back home, along with everyone else, since no one had heard from us in over two days. And every time I saw Nella, I became terribly despondent, because it put the same thought in my head: Was I ever going to see my beautiful children again?

Back in the summer heat of Brighton, the Weinstocks' two-year-old daughter, Melanie, wanted to talk to her mother, so Susan, the housekeeper, tried to call Yvonne on Tuesday night.

Getting a call through to Moscow was never easy. The phone system in Russia was archaic. Making direct-dial calls out of the country, once prohibited under the Communists, was still nearly impossible since the phones in use were twenty years behind technological times; cordless phones and fax machines seemed like science-fiction gadgets. Normally, one making an outbound call had to pre-schedule it with an operator; sometimes a call couldn't be made for days or even a week.

Even though Matthew Hurd had installed a fax machine in the SovAustralTechnicka office on Chekhova Street, the Weinstocks were not often at the office.

With Melanie crying for her mother, Susan called the number Yvonne had left her in case of emergencies. That number belonged to Richard Markson.

'Richard? It's Susan here,' she said when he picked up the phone. Markson, of course, had been ordered by Miasnikov to stay put in his apartment until further notice after witnessing the Weinstocks' abduction. He was still baffled by what he had witnessed on the morning of January 6th, and he may not have realised just how much of a worry he was to Grigory. Richard was the only person who could blow the lid off the entire plot. But while he was hardly the quickest thinker in the world, Richard knew enough to deflect Susan.

'Oh,' he said steadily, 'you're after Yvonne and Danny?'

'Yes. How are they?'

'Fine. Unfortunately, Danny forgot to pass on their number. Sorry, can't help you there.'

Susan would try Markson again over the next week, only to be fed the same line or hear an endlessly ringing phone. Oh well, she thought, we'll just have to wait until they call us. The phones in Russia must be useless. Or maybe they're very busy right now.

Richard, meanwhile, could take the sight of the same four walls only so long. After five days, he figured he could safely venture outside. He walked down a side street, had the uncomfortable feeling he was being followed, looked around, and saw two men in black overcoats coming up fast behind him. He tried to walk faster, but was jumped by the men, who knocked him off his feet and pummeled him with their fists. 'Stay home,' he was told, 'and if you say one word about the Weinstocks, we'll kill you and your parents in Australia.'

Markson stumbled back to his apartment, no doubt realising in

exactly how much danger he was. He ran up the stairs, shut the door behind him, and bolted it. He had no intention of going out for another walkabout any time soon.

A few days thereafter, he would creep out again, but this time he raced to the airport and waited there until he could catch a flight to Australia. There, he would say nothing about the kidnapping or the threats against him and his family. Mostly, he stayed home, dreading that he would hear or read in the media that the Weinstocks had been abducted, even killed. In that case, he resolved, he would plead ignorance.

On Wednesday, Christmas Day in Russia, Oleg must have felt big-hearted. Either that or he was cowed by the women who wanted Danny and me to come to the dining room table for the early afternoon holiday meal. Oleg petulantly did not join the feast. Instead, he sat out of sight in the kitchen with the babushka, surely as depressing a twosome as ever existed.

The dining table was a cornucopia of food. Silver fruit bowls were stocked with oranges and apples. There were platters of bright red tomatoes, pickled cucumbers, black and red caviar. And, for a change, fresh bread, both white and black. Platters lined the table with smoked salmon, cracked wheat, and large slabs of butter.

People were everywhere: men, women, and children in a great cacophony of glasses tinkling, forks being scraped against dishes, kids laughing and crying, and no one shutting his or her mouth for a minute. Masha and another woman named Natasha spooned out portions of food for the children, including Nella and her three-year-old brother, a bratty boy named Piotr. Marusia, whom we knew now to be the wife of one of the thugs named Boris, endlessly shuffled from the kitchen and came back bearing mountainous quantities of food.

When Danny and I seated ourselves in the middle of this mad scene, no one looked up. Grunting like animals at feeding time, everyone shoveled all the food they could into their mouths, belching heartily all the while. Boris was at the head of the table, and when Marusia brought out that enormous turkey we'd seen on the floor the night before, he made a big fuss, apparently about there not being a sufficiently large carving knife on the table. One of the other men went into the kitchen and came back with one—the very same machete-sized knife Oleg had menaced me with the day before. When the goon came close to the table, I flinched.

Being the guests of honour of the 'Addams Family,' did not put

me in a festive mood. At one point, they all began taking turns lifting their glasses and toasting us ostentatiously and loudly in Russian. Were they aggrandising us? Or were they actually toasting not to our health but to our deaths? Did they just assume they would be taking out our carcasses along with that of the turkey?

With all of this in mind, I had no trace of an appetite and only nibbled at some turkey. As it was, I had already lost at least five kilos during the two days here, and I could hardly recognise my gaunt face in the bathroom mirror. Danny, by contrast, had no problem stuffing himself along with the others. He had always been that way, able to keep his senses functioning normally, even in times of great stress.

I, on the other hand, wanted only to numb my senses. For now, that was my escape, and the vodka bottles on the table were my means of doing just that. By Russian tradition, one must completely drain a glass on every toast. I must have emptied five shot glasses of vodka into my gut. Little wonder I don't recall much else about that meal.

I was light-headed when we were returned to the upstairs bedroom, yet even all that vodka did not make me sleepy. My nerve endings were still standing straight up. It may have been Christmas in Mother Russia, but Oleg and his men were not Santa's elves. Always, I expected someone to come out of the shadows and beat us again. I could not avoid the thought that we were living on borrowed time. Oleg hadn't received the hard information he wanted as to how to get the money. The clock was ticking.

For Oleg, the feast could not have ended soon enough. When the table had been cleared, the dishes washed, and the women and children gone off to other places in the house, it was time for business again—only now there were some new faces with whom we had to contend.

At about 4pm, Danny was taken back downstairs to the dining room. I again stood quietly just inside the open archway of the bedroom, listening to what was said. I heard Oleg, but also two voices I didn't recognise: one, a man speaking in Russian; the other, a man who sounded like a proper British gentleman who translated questions Oleg and the other guy peppered Danny with about making phone calls to our 'rich relatives' overseas.

Danny went through the same drill as the day before, offering nothing new. At one point, he said to the translator, 'They have threatened to kill us if we do not pay this money,' he said. 'Is this

true?' Oleg, who apparently could understand more English than he let on, furnished the answer.

'Yes,' he said, 'is true.'

I imagined by then that the translator knew this already. In fact, something about him made me very curious and very worried. His English was so perfect, his voice so honey-dipped, his manner so civilised, that I could only think: KGB. From what I'd been told by Grigory, Russians who spoke in a bell-clear, British-sounding accent were more than likely or had been KGB agents. Many of them, the sons of wealthy Russians, had been sent to school in England, the brightest of them to Oxford or Cambridge. When they returned to Russia, they became prime targets of KGB recruiters, for their high intelligence and worldliness.

Grigory, of course, had spent some years in England as a young man, and he too had a tinge of that accent—though this man seemed far more urbane and sophisticated.

Could these new men, and especially Robert—or whatever his real name was—have been linked to Oleg by Grigory, and was Grigory their boss, or was it the other way around? Were these guys the real string-pullers? Were Oleg and even Grigory just toadies? If Robert was in fact ex-KGB, the circle of plotters had expanded beyond a band of half-crazed gypsies. We might be in the hands of people who had a PhD in torture, people who could eliminate us and not leave as much as a speck of dust behind as evidence. Would their injection into the plot be good or bad for us, or was that 'choice' merely the difference between being torn apart by Oleg's dogs or silently, quietly poisoned? Either way, it wasn't getting any easier on my nerves.

Straining hard to hear what was being discussed downstairs, it struck me that Oleg now seemed to be no more than a yes-man, grunting a word or two every once in a while as the interrogation continued. He did, however, reestablish his authority when Danny's answers were insufficient. At that point, his angry voice echoing throughout the house, Oleg grabbed Danny by the neck and hustled him off to that execrable cellar.

I gulped, knowing that it would now be my turn. But I was rather curious as well, wanting to know about these new players in the drama. When I was led downstairs, I could see that we would be dealing with a different animal. Both Kuzin and Robert were fair-skinned and fair-haired, well dressed and quaffed, and polished right down to their fingernails. Kuzin, the smaller of the two, couldn't have been older than thirty and was somewhat delicate looking. Standing only around five foot six, he wore a tailored, dark-gray suit and light-gray dress boots.

Robert, who was about twenty years older, stood about six feet.

He also wore a dark suit and stylish metal-rimmed glasses. With his cloying smile, his swagger, and courtly manners, he would have made a perfect diplomat.

For all their extraneous refinement, they may also have been well-dressed executioners. Both had exceptionally beady eyes. Once they began grilling me in tandem, Kuzin was so analytical that he kept trying to find hidden meaning in everything I said. The two of them conferred privately in hushed tones. Clearly, they were used to working as a team and were highly skilled interrogators. Not once did they raise their voices—in fact, I was the only one who did, bravely and probably stupidly screaming, 'What is it you want from us?' Neither batted an eyelash at that, but Robert did progressively become more threatening, hoping to break me so I'd reveal some secret information (which I didn't have).

They were the ice to Oleg's fire, and their dogged, unrelenting hectoring did ultimately locate a tree they could shake. That happened when I noticed they kept harping on the fact that Danny and I were Jews, which to them was apparently a synonym for being wealthy. Getting the message, I incorporated it in my answers. At one point, I said, 'We have very good friends—Jews—who have immigrated to America,' consciously using two 'magic words': Jews and America.

They bit.

'Which Jews will pay your business debt for you?'

'We know Jews who will pay money for our lives, if I have the chance to tell them how serious this situation is.'

'No!' came Robert's reply. 'This is a business debt and must be paid now. You cannot tell anyone you have been kidnapped or beaten at all.'

However, they sensed an opening. Being infinitely smarter than Oleg or Grigory, they by now must have realised that we really didn't have the funds in our account to authorise an immediate wire of money. It would take the involvement of other people, people who—to their delight—were American Jews.

If a script could be worked out that we could follow, which would not in any way tip off that we were in danger but simply seeking money for our business, such a call could be made. It would be a delicate thing for the kidnappers. They ran the risk of calls being traced and of letting us do the talking, speaking with people we knew but they didn't. They wouldn't have complete control for those few minutes.

This would leave cracks that perhaps we could exploit. Of course, we also would run some very perilous risks. If they ever suspected that we were trying to trick them, God knows what would happen. They might easily say the hell with it and kill us on the spot. That would

certainly happen if they got wind of any attempted rescue, or even if word leaked out that we'd been kidnapped. Yet tricking them would be our only chance. After all, we were going to be killed in any case, either before or after a ransom could be paid. We had absolutely nothing to lose.

With Kuzin and Robert agreeing that a call would be made, suddenly things didn't seem quite as hopeless. We had a tiny crack of life. But I was a long, long way from being optimistic.

Oleg now had me escorted back upstairs; a few minutes later, Danny was released from the cellar, and I told him about the plan to call 'our rich American relatives'—knowing there were prying ears listening from outside in the hall, I spoke the words unwaveringly, sincerely, not betraying that I had no bloody idea which relatives we could call. Neither did Danny. When we sat on the bed, in a whisper, he said, 'Who?'

'Well,' I whispered back, 'it's not like we have a choice, you know. We have only one relative in the US.'

He nodded. We both knew who would get the call. Only weeks ago, Ian Rayman had said to call him when we got back from Russia. Now, it would be up to him to determine if we would get back from Russia. We decided among ourselves that Danny would be the one to make the call. I would remain at the dacha. I was afraid I might break down and cry hearing Ian's voice. Danny would also be better able to explain the details of the business transactions relevant to the collection of the 'debt.'

It was around 7pm. Because of an old law from the Communist days that had not yet been changed, one could not make an outbound call in Russia until after midnight, so we knew wherever they would take Danny to make the call, it would be soon. The minutes ticked away slowly, agonisingly.

There was at least a small bit of relief during the tense prelude to the phone call. At around 10pm, the babushka flitted into the bedroom and made hand movements while saying, 'Doosh, doosh,' the Russian word for shower. She led us to the bathroom, instructed us to remove our clothes, and walked out. Again, the bathroom had no door, and we were somewhat reticent, but our skins were crawling, not having bathed since the morning we left Melbourne, so we went ahead and disrobed.

The bathroom was a microcosm of the contradictions in the house. The purple wallpaper and matching, shell-shaped wash basin only accentuated the demented décor. A thicket of rusty pipes and hoses poked out of random holes in the wall. One end of the dirt-stained, old-style tub tilted down so water could run into a drain; the other end looked like it had been broken off with a sledgehammer. If

the faucet was turned on too hard, the water would spill onto the floor and flood the room.

Another tub hooked to the same primitive gas-driven hot-water system was used as a makeshift washing machine. A soiled pile of wet clothing was inside it, and there was a wooden ladder across the top to hang clothes on to dry. It was all one step above the cavemen. And yet, on the peeling ceiling were expensive ceramic and glass chandeliers. One had exquisite detailing of pink roses; another had blue, hand-painted flowers.

The interior decorator of this house could only have been Rasputin, the infamous 'Mad Monk' of Czarist days, and anyone living here seemed to be indeed mad.

When Danny and I had peeled off our clothes, we gasped when seeing the bruises on each other's battered bodies. Rather than stand in that revolting tub, we let the water from the sink soak two sponges and swabbed each other, all the while eyeing the doorway to see if anyone was out in the hallway taking a peek. I also wondered the same about the big window, which had no blinds or shade. I could see out to the backyard; anyone down there could see right in whenever I would use the toilet.

Fortunately, only the babushka came in during our 'shower.' I had made sure to bring into the bathroom fresh clothing for us. Our old clothes were so dirty and smelly that I rinsed them in the sink and wrung them out and hung them on the radiator under the window of our bedroom.

Although we felt clean for the first time in three days, my nerves were still on edge as we waited for Danny to be taken to make that life-or-death phone call to Ian Rayman. Indeed, my whole body jerked up from the bed when I heard a voice from downstairs bark, 'Daniel!' But instead of making the call, when he went downstairs, several of the goons merely wanted him to help them move furniture—though they really just wanted to humiliate him. That became clear when they ordered him to lift a couch by himself and then laughed like hyenas when he couldn't. Then they sent him back upstairs, content in having won some sort of 'victory' by deriding a big, strapping man like Danny.

On his part, Danny just shook his head at how utterly insane was this gang. Rather than being humiliated, we both felt almost smugly superior to them. I even had a surge of confidence.

'We're going to get out of this,' I told him. 'I know it. I can feel it.'

'No,' he said. 'We won't get out. They're going to kill us.'

At about 10:45pm, Boris pushed open the cloth hanging and pointed at Danny.

'Daniel, telefon,' he said.

It was time.

Boris was wearing an overcoat, and he was carrying Danny's coat. So the call, we now knew, would be made on the outside, somewhere where outgoing calls to foreign countries wouldn't have to be booked in advance. I figured, in any case, that calling from the dacha would present too great a risk that the line could be traced, and it added to my anxiety that Danny would be taken out of the house. What if something went wrong? What if they caught him tipping off Ian? Would they kill him and then come for me?

All these fears were rattling in my head as Danny put on his coat and began walking out with Boris. After a few steps, he stopped, turned back to me, and reached out his hand. Mine went out to meet his, and for a brief moment, we held hands, saying not a word, our eyes saying everything. Then he was gone. The front door downstairs closed, then the gate clanged shut. I lay back on the bed. Waiting for him to come back, I knew, would be the worst torture of all.

THE FIRST CALL

It was a pleasure for Danny to put on his warm boots and thick shearling coat and go out into the cold air. Snow was falling lightly as he was walked to a waiting sedan, its motor already warmed up. Boris sat in the driver's seat, Oleg in the back next to Danny. As the car moved down the driveway, two other long, black cars followed behind, carrying Robert, Kuzin, and other hoods. There was a distinct pattern to the way the drivers of the cars took turns leading the pack —an old KGB ploy to keep any snoops confused about which car held the agency's prey.

After an hour riding on slippery country roads, Danny knew by the rising skyline that he was in downtown Moscow. He recognised streets he knew from his past trips. This was the business district. Soon, the destination became obvious: the office of SovAustralTechnicka, at 25 Chekhova Street.

After the convoy pulled up, Danny recognised something else: the dim figure of Grigory Miasnikov, coat collar up, cigarette in his mouth, standing just outside the darkened building. Danny was taken out of the car, surrounded by six men, and walked inside. Two of the men carried plastic bags containing turkey and black bread. Evidently,

they planned to stay a while.

Inside the familiar environs of the office suite, Robert took the lead. When everyone had taken seats around the big table in the conference room (whereupon some of the men occupied themselves with brandishing knives), Robert told Danny he wanted answers—useful ones, with no hemming or hawing—to just two questions: Who would Danny be calling, and what would he be saying?

Now, the name of Ian Rayman finally surfaced for the first time. Robert wrote the name down on a legal notepad. Then he tore off a page of the pad and slipped it in front of Danny.

'Write down what you will say to this Ian Rayman,' Robert said.

Danny composed a few questions and showed the paper to Robert, who took it and left the room with Miasnikov. Together, in Grigory's office, they honed the questions. Forty-five minutes later, they returned. Robert gave Danny the paper, on which were several new sentences including the very first one, which read: 'I am in hiding from the Soviet authorities …'

Danny had to hold himself back from displaying the pleasant surprise he felt. Ian, he thought, would not believe this line of bull—hiding from the Soviet authorities? Did Robert and Grigory think Americans were idiots, that Ian wouldn't know there was no Soviet Union anymore? What's more, Ian knew what Yvonne and Danny's business was all about. He knew the Russian 'authorities' were pretty much bystanders and several times had pulled strings to help them cut through red tape.

Amazingly, the kidnappers were giving Danny an opening line that might easily be taken as a red herring by Ian—and a red flag.

For Robert and Grigory, the lapse was likely born of desperation and greed. They wanted to create a bogeyman that would lend credence to their demand for money and assumed Americans still reliably considered 'Soviets' the enemy. Grigory was tone-deaf to Western modes of reality. This was somewhat understandable; he was boorish by nature. That Robert, with his Western sensibilities (as shown by his conscripting of a Western name as his alias during this caper), was just as goof-prone as Grigory—and the break he needed.

Keeping his poker face intact, Danny eagerly awaited making the call as Oleg spliced together wires from an office phone extension and the fax machine that would be used to call out. Robert, who would listen in on one extension using a headset to mask any sound, gave the thumbs-up sign.

Danny began dialing Ian's home number.

It was around 1pm in Wayne, New Jersey. Had the call been made a few minutes later, Ian would have been on his way to his office at the Pediatric Professionals Associates building a few miles away and likely would not have been accessible that day. As it happened, heavy rains the day before had flooded the basement of the building, knocking out the phone system. It was being repaired slowly, and many calls were going unanswered.

When the phone rang at the Raymans' home, Wendy picked up in the bedroom.

'Hello? Hello?' Danny said.

Wendy thought she knew the voice, but the sound quality was poor. There was a slight buzzing and crosstalk on the line. It had to be from overseas. But the voice was distinctive, if a bit stiff.

'Danny? Is that you?'

'Yes. I must speak with Doctor Ian Rayman. Please give me his number at the surgery.'

Again, Wendy was stupefied. Danny knew Ian's work number. Why did he sound so formal, like a stranger, drawing out his words so affectedly, so robotically? And why would he call his former brother-in-law 'Doctor Ian Rayman'? She knew Yvonne and Danny were on their Russian business trip. For him to call now at all was most odd. A shudder went through her. Something was going on.

'Danny, if you need to speak with Ian, he's right here,' she said, gesturing for Ian to go into another room and pick up an extension.

'Yes, I must speak to Doctor Ian Rayman.'

Ian put the phone to his ear. 'Hi. Danny?' he said.

Then he heard that dull, clipped replica of Danny, a Danny he did not know.

'Doctor Rayman,' began Danny, looking at the sheet of paper to make sure he touched all of his talking points, 'I am in hiding from the Soviet authorities.

'Yvonne and I arrived safely in Moscow and are staying with friends. We are in no danger.

'We will be out of contact for a few days.

'We need to raise one point six million dollars to cover a business debt.

'We will not be allowed to leave the country until this debt is paid.'

The pallid voice, the staccato cadence, the unconnected sentences and the non-conversational nature of the call led Ian to think this was perhaps a recorded message, until Danny responded to a few general questions. Ian assumed people were listening in on the other end and thus refrained from asking pointed questions that might put Danny on the spot. Instead, he addressed the money issue.

The money, Danny said, reading from Robert's script, was to be wired in US dollars to the Vnesh Econom Bank, formerly the Bank of Foreign Trade of the Soviet Union, in Moscow.

Ian played for time.

'I need to make some arrangements. It's going to take some time to put together that kind of money. I've got to call the bank. Can I call you back tomorrow? Where can I contact you?'

Robert was shaking his head furiously, no, no, no, and mouthed the words 'You will call him back' and stuck five fingers up.

'No. I will call you back tomorrow. Five o'clock or thereabouts.'

Robert nodded, then pointed to the last item on the sheet of paper: having Ian send a telex to the office confirming his willingness to pay the money. This too was a boon for Yvonne and Danny; the telex number could be traced right to the SovAustralTechnicka office. Yet Robert was willing to bend on this detail, believing that Ian bought the fact that this was a business debt, not a ransom. Besides, he would keep moving to different locations for future calls. The Russian police, he knew, were notoriously inept and riddled with corruption; any trouble from them could be erased with a few bribes.

After Ian agreed to send the telex that day, Robert ran his index finger across his throat, a signal to end the call. Danny hung up. Robert took off his headset and glanced at Oleg, who lifted a thumb into the air and smiled.

'Charasho,' he said.

Robert agreed. 'Yes,' he said, 'it was very good.' Relief flowed into Danny's body.

He would live until tomorrow.

In Wayne, Ian and Wendy stared at each other. Trying to make sense of the last few bizarre minutes, they agreed that the Weinstocks were in serious trouble. They bandied around disjointed thoughts: Where was Yvonne? What might have been done to her? It's that goddamn business that landed them in this mess. Heaven knows what kind of shady people they hooked up with. They thought back to their last trip to Australia. Remember that guy they met, the one who was with Yvonne and Danny that night at Toto's Restaurant? What was his name? Oh, yes, Grigory. Yes, that's it. Grigory something. Miasnikov, yeah, that's it. He ordered the grilled flounder, and he was so slick, so mysterious. Did Yvonne and Danny really know him that well before making him a partner? Could he be in on this thing?

The Raymans wanted to know more about this 'debt.' Ian had in

the past met Joe Krycer, the couple's attorney. Before doing anything else about the situation, they tried calling Krycer in Melbourne, but he wasn't in. Referred to the Weinstocks' accountant, Ian carefully sidestepped any mention of the call from Danny. He said Danny had told him to call Morris, as a potential investor. Did Morris know of any bad debts the company had? He said he didn't.

Clearly, then, the Weinstocks' 'debt' was something else. By any other name, it was a ransom.

'What do we do?' Wendy said. 'We don't have a million dollars.'

'Well,' Ian told her, 'we're going to have to make it look like we do.'

When Danny was gone, I was brought into the kitchen, and I just sat at the table, my eyes glazed, my hands trembling in worry. Most of the goons had left with Danny, but three remained behind and stood guard over me, mumbling amongst themselves and laughing. Then, one of them walked to where I was sitting and, saying nothing, grabbed my left wrist and slammed it hard against the red-and-white checkered plastic tablecloth while another pulled my wedding ring off my finger.

As I screamed in pain, the third man took out of his pocket a small tin of lighter fluid and dripped some on my hand. He reached in his pocket for a cigarette lighter and, with a smirk, flicked at it, holding it a few inches from my hand.

No matter how often these ghouls would pull a stunt like that, I never was prepared to expect merely a scare tactic. My heart pounding, I thought my entire body would ignite in flames, and only when they all laughed and left the room did I again realise the power of their psychological torture. I ran to the sink, rinsed my hand, and scrubbed it with a piece of soap, then rubbed myself raw with a dishrag. Then I went back upstairs and dissolved into tears until, at around 3am, I heard the front door open. My spirits lifted. Danny was back!

Things must have gone well with the call to Ian. Thank God.

Danny was genuinely pleased as he quietly filled me in on the details, though at this point, he had no idea what the next step would be beyond the follow-up call tomorrow. He also told me that on the ride back to the dacha, the car had been chased for a time by the Gaee, the Russian traffic police. When he saw the police car behind them, Oleg, who was sitting next to Danny in the back seat, asked Boris for a knife. Boris, who must have been in more than a few of

these sorts of chases with the law, slowed down, fooling the cops into believing he would stop, then when they were only a few yards behind, he slammed his foot hard on the gas pedal and sped off into the night.

'Damn,' I said, 'you just missed getting rescued.'

'No,' he replied, 'it's just the opposite. I just missed getting killed. If that car was stopped, Oleg would have killed me and would have killed the cops too.'

I looked him in the eye.

'Is there anybody out there who can help us?' I asked.

There was no answer. Only silence.

11

DAY FOUR: THURSDAY, JANUARY 9th, THE DACHA, MOSCOW, AND WAYNE

There is a well-known psychological condition commonly attributed to kidnapping victims: the so-called 'Stockholm Syndrome,' in which the victims come to identify and even fall in love with their abductors. Unless one actually lives through such an ordeal, it is impossible to understand just how anyone subjected to the constant degradation and anticipation of pain as well as inevitable death could become so attached to the very people inflicting these indignities. While I loathed my captors to the marrow—and would have sooner slit my own throat than feel any emotion other than pure loathing—and while their capacity to turn my stomach only kept growing, by day four, I found that I had settled into a kind of functional, if not exactly peaceful, coexistence with them.

I was now part of the 'family,' expected to pull my weight and pitch in with everyone else when it came to chores. Not only were Danny and I brought to the kitchen or dining room tables for meals, but I would also be trundled over to the sink to wash dishes or prepare food. I had, in effect, become the babushka's apprentice, working under her gaze, whether it was slicing bread exactly the way she did with a long knife, making a cut down the center of the loaf, then making precisely angled cuts on both sides, or putting three to six teaspoons of sugar into each glass of black tea.

Holding our fate in their hands as the family did, it was natural that we would want to please them. Perhaps we even believed subconsciously that the more they knew and liked us, the more difficult it would be for them to think of disposing of us like yesterday's trash. And, as bizarre as it sounds, even though none of them would have thought twice about abusing us, that was their job; on a personal level, they still had something of a proper respect for us, recognising our status as 'wealthy Westerners.'

For example, at moments when they weren't beating us or hauling us off to the cellar, they would politely ask for favours, such as borrowing the deck of playing cards Danny had in his suitcase. The lounge-bound goons would play Black Jack for hours on end, staked

by thousands of dollars or stacks of rubles on the table. They would then make sure to return the deck, albeit with their greasy fingerprints smeared all over it.

It was also possible, rarely, to look at these men as semi-human instead of a pack of animals. Sometimes in the wee hours, I would see Oleg walking up and down the hallway outside our bedroom, cradling and rocking to sleep his youngest child, an eighteen-month-old son named Sascha.

The children of the dacha, in fact, had a softening effect on the environment—though, sadly, being raised in that environment boded very badly for all the kids. Even at age three, Oleg's other son, Piotr, was already psychologically scarred. He would run around using a real knife as a toy, pretending to attack the adults and even little Sascha. Allowed to stay up until after midnight, he would be unbearably cranky the next day. Just three and already he was a monster like his father.

No matter how 'domesticated' we would get, it never took long for cold reality to set in, and usually in the most ludicrous ways. One day, Danny took an orange from a dining room bowl without asking permission from the babushka. Seeing this, the old harpy ran after him, shrieking and raising hell. That sort of 'crime' could get us whipped brutally.

Our minds were always occupied with a sense of impending doom. On day four, at around 11am, a group of men in coveralls arrived at the dacha and began hammering something; the sound of the banging went on for several hours and was so unrelenting that Danny and I actually believed they were constructing a gallows in the house! It wasn't until later that we saw they were carpenters renovating the living room ceiling. Oleg's gang had done such a good job at psychological torture that we were now psychologically torturing ourselves, with no help from them.

Although Danny and I couldn't speak openly about any strategy we might have had for the phone calls to Ian Rayman, in the interim between the first and second calls we were able to communicate between us some clues we wanted to get across to him. We always did share a kind of telepathy, and now we would have to use it to create ways to tip off Ian that we were in grave danger without actually saying so. These clues had to sound sincere and not contrived, spoken in a matter-of-fact tone of voice. We could practice doing this by throwing out possible clues to each other. If either of us thought of

something that sounded promising, the other would 'check-mark' it with a near-imperceptible arch of an eyebrow.

The best clue we came up with developed after Danny recalled that Ian and Wendy had made plans to go on vacation with their kids to the Catskill Mountains the very next day, Friday.

'The kids are looking forward to it,' he said. 'But we must stop them. They must keep working to get the money.'

Immediately, like a bolt from the blue, I knew what we could say. 'Right. They are looking forward to it, to visit their Uncle Chaim and Auntie Tova.'

Danny's eyebrow flinched. Perfect! We both knew that these relatives of theirs had died recently. If Ian had caught on to Danny's robotic manner the last time they spoke, he would surely know the score hearing such an obvious whopper of a lie. Of course, the chance did exist that he would be so flummoxed that he would lose his bearings and correct the statement—in which case, the game would be over, and we might be done away with right then and there.

To keep that from happening, Danny and Ian would need to have their own kind of telepathy. But would they?

'A CREDIBLE MATTER'

Ian did in fact 'get it' on the first call. He had already begun to put out feelers, though he was flying in the dark, with no idea of where to go from here. His first step after Danny's call was to call a family member, a lawyer, who, because of the Russian element of the story, put him in touch with the only person he could think of who knew that turf: Jerry Shestak, a partner of the Philadelphia law firm of Wolf, Block, Schorr & Solis-Cohen. Shestak had an impeccable reputation and friends in very high places, having represented not only the Russian government in trade matters but a number of top-tier American corporations needing to establish a foothold in the newly formed capitalist country. If anyone could get a few doors open in Russia, he could.

When Ian called and relayed the details of Danny's call, Shestak leaned back in his chair and thought a while. A blunt and rather gruff man in his early fifties, he laid out in lawyerly fashion three possible scenarios based on hard-edged realities:

- It could be a kidnap/ransom.
- It could be a business debt. However, if the Weinstocks owed

money to the Russian 'authorities,' they were not in fact being 'held.' It would be a commercial debt, not a criminal situation, and the new Russian government would not tolerate old-style alliances with the underworld.

• It could be a cooked-up, bogus story. They were perhaps desperate for money and used the Moscow trip as a convenient backdrop to con the Raymans into getting cash for them.

Ian was a little taken aback by Shestak's last two scenarios because it would mean Yvonne and Danny were connivers, not victims. While he knew them better than that, right then he would have taken those scenarios in a second. As he told Jerry, 'I can live with anger more than I can with fear. We may never speak with them again if they're pulling something, but at least we'd know they were alive and safe.'

They had no choice but to act on the first premise, because if it was so, the clock was ticking on the Weinstocks' lives. There was someone Shestak thought could be of greater help: a young Russian fellow working for his firm, Dimitry Afanasiev, who had once apprenticed in the prosecutor's office in Leningrad. He would tell the young man about the situation and told Ian to call and ask for Dimitry the next day. For now, he advised, call the FBI. 'They may not be able to do anything; it's a Russian case. If it's extortion, then you are the victim,' he said. 'The FBI ought to know about it.'

Ian had been reluctant to go to the FBI. All that red tape, all that official crap. And what if they found out Yvonne and Danny were trying to pull off an extortion scheme? Would Ian then be responsible for the couple being sent to prison? It would be so much easier if he could just talk to them, find out what the hell was going on. What did he know about dealing with such things—what to ask, how to tell if other people were lurking behind them when they called? He called the closest FBI office, in Newark, and waded through the maddening ritual of being routed from one operator to another until finally being connected to a supervisory agent who took all the information. The matter worked its way across a chain of assessors and investigators. Follow-up calls were made to Ian, others to the Weinstocks' business associates in Melbourne with whom Ian was familiar.

Finally, late that afternoon, a determination was made. The threat to the Weinstocks was deemed 'credible.' At 4pm, the phone again rang at the Raymans'. On the other end was an agent named Gerry Ingrisano. 'Dr Rayman,' he said, 'will you be at home tonight? I'd like to come out and talk to you.'

When he arrived at the house at around 8pm, Ingrisano was accompanied by two other agents, Joe McShane and Thomas A.

Cottone Jr. Ian and Wendy took them into the living room. At the time, Danny's teenage son, Jonathan, who'd been staying with the Raymans, had been in the kitchen on a food run. When the three men in crisp business suits strode in, Wendy asked him to go upstairs. 'I don't want him to hear any of these things about his mum and dad,' she told them. 'It would upset him terribly.'

Ingrisano nodded. Fortunately, he noted, it was a big house. 'But let's keep an eye out for him.'

Then he opened the cover of his notepad. 'Okay,' he said, 'now, let's go over this whole thing again.'

The conversation stretched past midnight. Ingrisano sat back and pondered the uniqueness of the case. He'd been an agent for twelve years, had been an analyst in the white-collar crime section in Washington DC and had seen some challenging cases in his time. Never had he come across something like this. Logistically, it was a three-headed monster, a wicket of conflicting orbits and jurisdictions: Australian citizens kidnapped in Russia and demanding money from America. Could anything even be done by the bureau? There was no mechanism in place to effect communication between America and Russia, much less coordinate any kind of rescue operation. Where along the locus of American and Russian law enforcement could the two ends meet? The scope of this case was so broad and so unprecedented, and the options were so limited.

Ingrisano saw in these people's faces how concerned, how worried they were. He tried not to let emotion get in the way when he worked a case, but he knew the difficulties. They could investigate, but how could they get that information to the right people in Russia? There were a lot of protocols involved, a lot of roadblocks. The FBI had no legal attaché in Moscow, no contacts, no infrastructure, no one with a track record of dealing with them. Structurally, it just seemed impossible. But that is hardly a sufficient explanation to people whose relatives are in a life-and-death situation. Gerry felt they owed it to the Raymans to do all they could and hopefully find a way as they progressed. He was under no illusions. It was a long shot. All the FBI could do was take it a step at a time. The first step for them would be the next phone call from Russia. That would answer a lot of questions.

THE THURSDAY CALL

Ian woke up that day with his stomach knotted and it would stay that way the whole day. It was something of a relief that the pediatric

office was especially hectic. Patients were backed up because of the previous day's flood, leaving him scant time to think about the next call from Russia. Scheduled to be in surgery from 6 to 9pm, he had to scramble to find other doctors to cover for him so he could be home at 5 and await the call with the FBI men, who would bring equipment to try to trace the call. Driving home, his hands squeezing the wheel tightly, he arrived at 5:10.

The Thursday night run up to the call was interminable. Since it wouldn't be made until around 2:30am Friday, our time, Danny and I had all day Thursday to prepare for the moment. Having approved of Danny's performance the night before, Robert, Grigory, and Oleg apparently trusted us to adhere to their directions without having to drill them into us any more. This was a good sign, we thought. They could almost taste the money; they were depending on our ability to deliver, even if it meant we could improvise on the script a bit. That, of course, afforded us some wiggle room to drop our clues and, if there was a God in heaven, more time to get the deal done.

Time. That was everything, the very boundary of our world. The longer things stretched out, the longer we would remain alive. The problem was that we had no earthly idea what Ian would—or could—do. As it stood right now, we couldn't even imagine being rescued. After all, how could an SOS sent to the United States bring about a rescue attempt in Russia? If that were somehow possible, did we even want it to be attempted? If Oleg ever saw police storming the dacha, we would no doubt be silenced in a minute. We had heard how notoriously incompetent and corrupt the Russian police were. Oleg had probably paid off the local cops, and Robert and Grigory may have had the intelligence people on a leash. A rescue seemed as though it could easily be a waste of time.

Thus, our best hope may have been that Ian didn't figure it all out and actually did send the money. Maybe then they would let us go, as unlikely as that seemed. Every instinct I had, told us to drop our clues and pray against all odds for a rescue. My gut told me that was the only way I would ever see my children again.

Oleg came to our bedroom at 11:30pm, to take both of us this time. Apparently, Oleg, or Robert, or whomever, wanted me to

observe the call so I would know firsthand what Ian was saying. They may have also believed it would keep Danny from deviating too much from the script if he saw me in the room, a knife held to my throat.

Danny and I, wearing sneakers, sweats, and our overcoats, were led into the lead car of the same three-car convoy to make the same trip over the same icy roads back to the Chekhova Street office, where we were met by Grigory. After the successful call of the previous night, Robert, Grigory, and Oleg looked completely unworried, unfazed by the prospect that Ian had been able to connect the dots from his telex to the office. Robert in particular was sanguine to the point of being blasé. I wondered if he was thinking that this was too easy.

Maybe, just maybe, I thought, he would let his guard down somewhere along the way.

As Danny sat at the conference table in the boardroom, Oleg roughly diverted me to the opposite side of the room. When Danny began to dial, Oleg twisted my arm and forced it behind my back. Then he took out a knife and perched it under my chin. I was not to say a word, utter a sound.

Waiting for the call to go through, I swallowed hard, trying in vain to shoo away the lump in my throat.

WAYNE, NEW JERSEY

Ingrisano, McShane, and Cottone set up the recording/tracing equipment, then instructed Ian what to say. Be calm, they said, be yourself. Be normal. Establish a 'comfort zone' of trust and interdependence. Be accommodating, but don't make any promises. And, most of all, keep talking, find out more details. 'Give us something to check out, places, people,' Ingrisano said. 'Find out how much danger they're in. Listen for telltale background noises. And talk, talk, talk.'

There was already some solid information that was ferreted out by Ian during the first call—the telex number that linked to the SovAustralTechnicka office and the account number at the Vnesh Bank. It wasn't conclusive, but these were pieces. Now, the objective was to wheedle a number for Ian to be able to call back, to be better able to trace the origin of the call.

Call-tracing technology had evolved a long way. In the digital age, it was even possible to instantly trace a call; caller-ID systems, soon to be available to home phones, could pull up an address from a

worldwide database within seconds. However, this was Russia, a wasteland so technologically starved that tracing a number and an address required archaic manual switchboard-routing. Given these realities, the best option was to be able to initiate a call to Russia since an outbound call could cut the trace time by as much as half.

Ingrisano sat at the kitchen table across from Ian, an earpiece connected to a recording/tracing device. When the phone rang at 5:40, the loud jingle in the hushed room made Wendy jump. Ingrisano flipped on the switch of his machine. It was 'go' time.

'Hello? Danny?' Ian said.

He was met with the same subdued, mechanical voice, and each question he posed that did not directly deal with the money transfer had Danny ducking, dodging, and re-diverting him back to the money.

Robert had plugged in another headset so I could audit the conversation. After a few minutes, I could tell that Robert wasn't catching the nuances of Ian's questions, the precise nature of which led me to believe Ian had been coached, no doubt by someone right there next to him. I knew Danny could tell this, too, and was just waiting for the right moment to let vital information drop into the conversation.

Right away, Ian inquired about the deal that had created the $1.6 million 'debt.'

'Tell me again what this transaction was all about,' he said. 'Didn't you send computers for fertiliser?'

My heart leaped. How did Ian know that? We never told him about the deal. He could only have learned of it by making inquiries of our associates in Melbourne. Whoever he was working with, perhaps they'd begun to fit the pieces together. Could it be he knew that Grigory Miasnikov was behind the whole thing?

Danny stayed cool and on point, his stiff and formal manner enough of a clue for the moment.

'Yes,' he said, 'but that was a different deal. Listen carefully, Doctor Rayman. The money must be paid. We cannot leave until it is received.'

'Are you in any danger?'

'Doctor Rayman, we are not in any danger,' Danny said. 'We are not in the slightest amount of danger. Not even the minutest amount of danger.'

I could read Danny's mind—Ian could not have failed to grasp the message of that all-too-obvious bit of overstatement. But did Robert,

as well? I tipped a glance at the suave, urbane fop. No reaction. Whew. Had we really fooled what may have been a polished, ex-KGB man? Or was he as smart as he seemed, and would he make us pay for our insolence later?

Given his inscrutability, it was impossible to know. However, it did seem as if Robert was perturbed by Ian's next question: 'Grigory Miasnikov is there also? Can I speak to him?'

Again, my heart jumped. Was Ian getting too close? Robert reflected for a few seconds. He could have been thinking: This fellow Ian is sharp. No use trying to feed him lies. Then, too, if Grigory was outed, he might turn out to be an asset. Miasnikov too was smooth and plausible as a businessman; he could put a human, if villainous, face on the rather nebulous 'business' deal in question.

Robert nodded to Grigory, then to Danny to respond in the affirmative.

'Sure,' Danny went on, 'Grigory is right here.'

Now it was Ian's turn to be manipulated and conned by the man who lured us into his web.

Grigory took the phone and with his snake-charming smarminess played the role of the innocent bystander.

'Doctor Rayman? This is Grigory Miasnikov. I remember we met in Melbourne. It was great pleasure to meet you and your wife.'

'Yes, I remember too. Can you tell me what's going on over there?'

'I will explain. This is business deal. It is time the debt should be paid to the Far East Trading Company in Vladivostok. Otherwise, there will be criminal proceedings. It has been too long.'

Rather than accept the explanation meekly, Ian became confrontational. 'Why did you allow Yvonne and Danny to come to Moscow? Why did you let them get into this trouble?'

'It could not be helped. I warned them when they were in Australia. I am in trouble, as well.'

With that, Grigory handed the phone back to Danny, who asked Ian about the progress of the payment.

'We still have not been able to contact the rest of the family,' Ian said.

Seeing that Robert was getting antsy, Danny and I knew now was the time to drop our best clue.

'Doctor Rayman, I know you are looking forward to visiting Uncle Chaim and Auntie Tova this weekend in the Catskills.'

I could hear Ian's throat catch ever so slightly. Maintaining the same tone, he repeated the refrain. 'Yes, we are looking forward to seeing Uncle Chaim and Auntie Tova this weekend. We'll pass on your regards.'

Bingo! There was no doubt now. Message received.

It had been passed along so unobtrusively that Robert didn't even bother to translate the seemingly innocuous banter to Oleg and the others. Instead, he motioned for Danny to wrap up.

When Ian next asked, 'Can I speak with Yvonne?' Robert shook his head no.

'She is not here,' Danny replied. 'She is back at the house we are staying in.'

'Can I call her at the house?'

'Doctor Rayman, that is not possible. But I'm sure she can be here for the next call.' That was another smart move by Danny, as it would involve me in the phone-calling process, giving us more of a chance to get our clues through—provided I could steel myself enough to keep from breaking down in tears once I would get on the line.

'When can we speak next?' Danny asked.

Ian paused. 'We'll be talking to the bank again in the morning—no, wait, make it Monday. The banks are closed for the weekend. I will call you. Where can you be contacted?'

This, I sensed, was Ian's big opening—and Danny, surprised that Robert didn't shut him down, hurriedly complied.

'Here is the number,' he said, giving out the Chekhova Street office number.

I was about to tell myself 'Bingo!' again, before speculating there was a reason why Robert hadn't objected to this key piece of information: We would not be brought back here for future calls. We would be taken to God knows where. It was not a comforting thought.

And so when the call ended, and we were bundled back into the car for the ride back to the dacha, I was not nearly as hopeful as I wanted to be. If Ian could do something with the information he now had, how could we believe we were getting anywhere when looking ahead was like staring into a big, gray cloud?

WAYNE, NEW JERSEY

Gerry Ingrisano heard enough to be clear in his own mind that the Weinstocks were in a dire situation. Although the call didn't last long enough to get a trace of the number, he was heartened that Danny had proffered the SovAustralTechnicka number, that Ian had spoken to Grigory Miasnikov on the phone, and that Grigory had given the name of the Far East Trading Company—now, some of the dots had been connected. Most significantly, Ian had bought more

time.

Ian immediately composed another telex and sent it off to 25 Chekhova Street. It read: 'BECAUSE OF THE LARGE SUM OF MONEY INVOLVED—MANY BANKS ARE INVOLVED. WAITING.' When confirmation came in that the telex had been accepted, Ingrisano gnashed his teeth. Damn, he thought, what if those bastards are there right now? If only we had feet on the ground in Russia.

He had an idea. Ian and Wendy were Australian; they were still officially citizens. If they notified the Australian Embassy in Moscow, it would establish a 'point of contact' in Moscow. He told Ian to call the Embassy and tell them about the phone calls. In the meantime, he would have the bureau provide information of the case to the Australian Embassy in Washington DC and to government officials in Canberra, Australia. Perhaps this would open a channel for crucial information sharing.

It had better, he thought. From what he had heard, the taciturn FBI man was certain that the Russian authorities had nothing to do with the Weinstocks' plight; this was in every sense a criminal enterprise. He rushed back to the Newark office and filled out his report, stamping it 'Urgent.'

12

DAY FIVE:
FRIDAY, JANUARY 10th
THE DACHA AND WAYNE, NEW JERSEY

'A SERIOUS SITUATION'

On Friday morning, the head agent of the Newark office wired a memorandum to the bureau's headquarters in Washington DC. It read, in part:

> FM: FBI NEWARK (9A-NK-72769) (P)
> TO: Director FBI/IMMEDIATE
> SUBJECT: IAN RAYMAN VICTIM; EXTORTION
> REQUEST OF FBIHQ:
> FBIHQ IS REQUIRED TO DISSEMINATE THE CONTENTS OF THIS COMMUNICATION TO APPROPRIATE OFFICIALS OF THE GOVERNMENT OF AUSTRALIA IN THE U.S. AND AUSTRALIA.
> RE: TELCALL FROM NEWARK, GMRA … CONTINUE ATTEMPTS TO … RAISE $1.6 MILLION. WIRE THE $1.6 MILLION TO VNESH ECONOM BANK (BANK OF FOREIGN TRADE OF THE SOVIET UNION), MOSCOW. DANIEL WEINSTOCK TOLD IAN RAYMAN HE AND HIS WIFE YVONNE HAVE BEEN UNHURT BUT WOULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO LEAVE MOSCOW. DANIEL WEINSTOCK WOULD NOT GIVE DETAILS ON HOW HE WAS BEING PROHIBITED FROM LEAVING MOSCOW.
> DANIEL WEINSTOCK SAID HE COULD BE REACHED AT TELEPHONE NUMBER (REDACTED). IT WAS AGREED THAT IAN RAYMAN WOULD CONTACT DANIEL WEINSTOCK AT 6:00 P.M., EST, 1/13/92, AT THAT TELEPHONE NUMBER. DANIEL WEINSTOCK SAID THAT TELEPHONE NUMBER IS AT NUMBER 25 CHEKHOVA STREET, MOSCOW. THAT ADDRESS IS THE OFFICE OF (REDACTED) JOINTLY OWNED COMPANY, JV (JOINT VENTURE) SOVAUSTRALTECHNICKA.

DURING THE TELEPHONE CONVERSATION, DANIEL WEINSTOCK TOLD IAN RAYMAN THAT HIS BUSINESS PARTNER GRIGORY MIASNIKOV WAS THERE WITH HIM. GRIGORY MIASNIKOV THEN TALKED TO IAN RAYMAN AND SAID THAT DANIEL WEINSTOCK WAS IN A SERIOUS SITUATION; IT COULD BECOME A CRIMINAL MATTER, AND HE COULD BE ARRESTED. DANIEL WEINSTOCK COULD BE ARRESTED BECAUSE OF THE LEGAL DEBTS OF HIS COMPANY TO A STATE-OWNED COMPANY—FAR EAST TRADING COMPANY.

Now the FBI had a kidnap-extortion plot with international implications on its hands. What it didn't have was a definitive way to go about dealing with it. Sitting at his desk late that Thursday night, Gerry Ingrisano felt like a chained wildcat. As much as he wanted to do something to help two people halfway around the world, he could do nothing more. He would analyse the tape of the last call, and he would be back at the Raymans' home on Monday, again trying to glean critical information to pass along—though to whom he had no idea.

All he knew was that someone had better be able to make such a person appear out of thin air, and damn fast.

It would be a maddening three days of uncertainty and uneasy anticipation waiting for Monday to arrive, hopefully with some good news from Ian. At least on the day of a call, I knew we could occupy ourselves with what to tell Ian and derive some idea of where we stood. Now, it was a matter of killing time, coping with mind-numbing boredom, trying not to step on anybody's toes in the dacha.

By now, we were grateful that the beatings of the first few days had abated as we fused into the 'family,' yet the psychological scarring of the early torture influenced the way we saw everything, even the most mundane of events.

That Friday, for example, a pipe under the house froze in the brutal, subzero cold, so there was no water from any of the faucets or in the toilets. The only drinking water was kept in a twenty-gallon steel milk container next to the sink in the downstairs bathroom, which happened to be right next to the cellar where we had been

dumped like potato sacks in the dark for hours at a time. When I was instructed to do dishes that day, I had to stand over that bathroom sink, a step from the sight and putrid stench from inside the open trapdoor.

Because the bathrooms were unusable, we all had to use the backyard. Apparently, the pipes froze regularly, and for the family, this was a common restroom alternative. For us, it was anything but common to pull down our pants and defecate in a freezing yard, just like the dogs. In fact, the dogs had first call on the grounds; if any of them were doing their business, we would have to wait our turn. But then, in the pecking order of the house, we were lower than the dogs, which were treated far better.

Not by coincidence, the pack of them consisted of the meanest breeds on earth—a Rottweiler, a Doberman, and a German shepherd. There was also a Rottweiler puppy in training to do what the others did: bark and growl at any sound outside the house. And despite the fact that they were kept exclusively outside in the cold, they were all revered and catered to. The family's highest priority was that the dogs were fed. There were prodigious amounts of food—not canned but real beef—reserved for the four of them, and the babushka would chop and dice it for their meals.

Whereas Danny and I were offered provisions once or twice a day —usually on the order of cold, leftover spaghetti and stale bread—the dogs always seemed to be chomping down sirloin by comparison. Still, they were always hungry, which made us wonder if perhaps they might bite off an arm if we got too close to them when we were in the yard sharing their bathroom. Fortunately, they seemed to be more interested in watching than attacking. Like an audience, they would sit raptly looking at us do our business. We were their entertainment. I'm not sure the same couldn't be said for some of the men in the gang, who seemed to overly enjoy watching me through windows and doors, and likely thought seeing me degraded like a dog was the ultimate peepshow.

My fear of the hounds, if not the men, didn't last long. I grew up around dogs and loved them, and I had more fondness for these four animals than I did for any of the human monsters in the house. While Danny—and all the 'tough' men—were petrified of the dogs and kept their distance, I would let them sniff the back of my hand, knowing that was a non-threatening gesture. They would sniff, sense that I liked them, and become playful and docile. Those are the kind of moments one takes for granted in life. I vowed to myself I would never take those moments for granted if I ever got out of this mess alive.

That afternoon, the escapist idyll ended when the puppy, which

they called ‘Roka,’ escaped out of the yard through a hole in the fence and ran off. I never saw such a commotion. Nearly everyone in the house went looking for it, and the entire neighbourhood joined in the search. The dog was never found, putting them all in a sour mood. I could only hope they didn’t take it out on us.

Just being out of that brooding, suffocating house was refreshing. Several times that day, we were permitted to put on scarves and coats and hats and step through the deep snow. I felt my nose tingling in the bitter cold as I would find a spot to squat. Even the rush of cold on my bare bottom felt good. Danny and I even found a brief moment to laugh, the first time we had in five days, when he began covering up the snow he had soiled with fresh white snow.

‘You look like a dog,’ I told him. We both broke up.

The laughter was fleeting. Late that afternoon, we were in the kitchen when the front door opened and in came about half a dozen men dressed in dark green, military-style uniforms, guns holstered around their waists. Danny and I reflexively tensed up. The day before, we had seen a truck drop off some heavy digging equipment of some kind in the backyard. Now, our imaginations ran wild.

Were these rogue militiamen hired by Oleg to come and use that equipment to dig holes back there—holes that would be our graves? Not, as it turned out, on this day, anyway. The men did go into the yard, but only to work on the water pipe. They were, we guessed, local cops or security people paid off by Oleg to do the job rather than allowing anyone in the house who might see us and would not be trusted to keep quiet. At 5pm, the water was working again, and the uniforms marched back out the front door.

Thus, on a day when nothing particularly eventful happened, good or bad, at various times during the day we thought we might be eaten alive by dogs or buried alive by people fixing a water pipe. That was what passed for reality in our current state of mind.

Clearly, boredom now was our enemy, breeding all sorts of imagined nightmares. All we could think about was Monday. It could not come soon enough.

13

DAY SIX:
SATURDAY, JANUARY 11th
THE DACHA, KALUGA, AND PHILADELPHIA

Beginning at around 9am, the dacha began filling up with people. Loud voices, trudging footsteps, and children's squeals intermingled. Apparently, on weekends the house was a kind of gathering place for the family's women, their friends and children, and, as such, a time for the men to vacate and go hang out in a place for the 'men only.' This evidently was such a male-bonding ritual that Oleg wanted to impress Danny with just how manly Russian men could be. Prisoner or not, Danny was a 'wealthy Westerner,' assumedly used to the finer comforts and 'gentlemen's' pleasures life had to offer—though, in truth, only the first applied to Danny, who was never much for Animal House-style carousing.

This, then, was to be Oleg's day to show off the perks earned by a Russian Mob boss, with Danny as his witness and guest. At around 3pm, Danny was piled into a waiting Fiat Tipor, and another convoy of cars set out for points unknown. In the meantime, I would have to make do assimilating with the congregation of fat Russian hens and their whiny children.

Oleg made sure I would know that whatever they wanted from me, I would comply. Before he left with Danny and most of the men, he came into our bedroom, a billiard cue in hand, followed by Sascha, Boris, and four of the women. Pointing to our suitcases with the stick, he motioned for Danny to open them all. Then, as we stood by watching defenselessly, the women began to reach in and help themselves to whatever items they desired, throwing what they didn't want on the floor.

We had already noticed that certain items had been looted from our luggage, but usually when we were not in the room. Nella and her stepmother, Rae, would try on my clothes they fancied and take them. Now, we had to suffer the indignity of watching our clothing, even our underwear, being stolen right before our eyes—including one of Danny's more expensive suits and what was left of my more expensive underwear and pajamas. One woman simply carried out my Estee Lauder makeup as though from a fire sale.

Fortunately, Danny was able to get away from this demented henhouse. I was not so lucky, remaining enmeshed in their company for hours, somehow trying to remain in their good graces even as I wanted the dogs to have them for lunch. More ominously, I noticed that one of the men had stayed behind apparently to watch me. As it happened, it was the worst of the lot, the greasy, sadistic Sascha—the one we had right away nicknamed the Snake. I could only hope he would stay out of my way.

THE RUSSIAN BADA-BING

As the convoy passed over bumpy, sometimes barely paved roads, Danny knew the destination on this trip was not Moscow. After about an hour, he saw out of the back seat window a sign reading, 'To Kaluga.' Kaluga! he thought. Was he really being taken to this city? It was just southwest of Moscow, famous to Russophiles for its prominent place in history as a fortress on the banks of the Oka River, Moscow's gateway to the south and west, a mercantile and cultural centre. Kaluga's geographical and political importance was such that during the Cold War it had been designated a 'closed city,' off limits to Westerners. Danny was excited by the thought of going in and a little nonplussed by the notion that a brigand like Oleg might have connections here.

Indeed, the latter became clear as soon as they entered the city limits. Rather than being given a tour of the mosques and merchant centres along the Oka, the Tipor was taken through the dingy, dimly lit streets of what looked to be a tawdry 'red light' district lined with dilapidated storefronts, cheap bars, and fleabag hotels. Hookers in leather miniskirts and stiletto heels roamed from corner to corner.

Pulling into an alleyway behind a fleabag called the 'Russ Hotel,' the men got out of their cars, and Oleg began to bang on a wooden door. When it opened, the group strode into a smoke-filled room of people sitting around small, circular tables hoisting glasses of vodka and beer. Voices were raised so they could be heard over loud rock music blaring from loudspeakers.

Most of the occupants were middle-aged men similar in appearance to Oleg's gang of misbegottens, whom they obviously knew well. When they entered, everybody took turns arising to shake their hands, put arms around their shoulders, or slap them on the back. Garrulous laughter reverberated through the room, which was connected to a gymnasium, a locker room, and a sauna. At some of

the tables, mostly overweight Russian floozies in skimpy, far-too-tight outfits and with teased-out hair drank with the men, willingly offering themselves to pawing hands.

In its cheerful perversity, the scene was a Russian-coloured version of the fictionalised hangout made famous by the Sopranos television show, the Bada-Bing bar, in which 'goodfellas' spent their downtime away from rival gangs' guns and nagging wives, telling stories, falling-down drunk, and fornicating in back rooms. Here, Oleg—their Godfather, albeit a lower-case one by any standard—was properly respected and feared. He would sit at his own private table deciding to whom he would speak. If important business were afoot, he would move to a back office behind a closed door. Undoubtedly much time had been spent back there in discussion about the Weinstock kidnap plot. Tellingly, no one in the joint seemed to need an explanation of the tall, stocky Westerner's identity.

Today, though, Oleg kept all business talk at bay. He was there only to show off and impress his prize catch—Danny. The order went out: Cater to the Australian, show him a good time.

Immediately, Danny was given a seat at a table cluttered with bottles of Moskovskaya vodka, brandy, Pepsi Cola, and mineral water. A young waiter in a dirty, white dinner jacket kept fresh bottles coming. It was yet another surreal experience for Danny, who had no idea why he was here or how he was supposed to act—or if a preening Oleg merely took him here to have him beaten up in front of his Mob buddies as a show of power.

Danny sensed no hostile intentions. While some of the Mob slugs stared warily at him, others raised glasses to him and even invited him to join games of darts at a board on the back wall. Danny didn't try to read Oleg's mind. If he had no choice but to drink with the crowd, he would. There were worse ways to kill time. As time went on, he found himself, remarkably, arm wrestling with some of his own captors, including the smooth-talking but sinister suspected KGB derivatives, Kuzin and Robert. If only that rat Grigory Miasnikov was here, he thought. I'd slam his hand through this table!

He ate from platters of boiled potatoes and veal Schnitzel. Then, to his utter amazement, he was invited to 'take a steam.' Stripping down in the locker room and covering his middle with a towel, he stood in a coterie of near-naked gangsters, who perused his black-and-blue bruises with a professional detachment not unlike body-shop workers checking dents on a car. They all then headed into the sauna, along with a young woman they called Sveta, to do with as they pleased.

When Danny emerged from the bone-soothing heat waves, he was no less fearful about his survival. But, as Yvonne would note when he

got back to the dacha late that evening, ‘You’re certainly in a good mood.’

Yvonne could not say the same about herself. In fact, during the same time he was living high in Kaluga, she had been scarred forever, physically and mentally, in Noginsk.

As soon as Danny had left, I was given no peace. Immediately, the old babushka ordered me first to clean and polish a large samovar urn, then to vacuum the entire upstairs floor. The latter made me feel ill since I was holding the metal pipe with which I had been beaten by Oleg.

When I was done with that, one of the women handed me some rags and pointed to the bathroom. That was my next assignment. I got down on my knees, trying to scrape the muck from the filthy sink, toilet, and bathtub.

But the chores didn’t stop there. Next, Oleg’s odoriferous daughter Nella, displaying more of her rudimentary English, carried a message from her gnarly grandmother for me to clean the windows. That ripped it for me. I didn’t care what might happen, but I would not do their windows; there must have been thirty of them in the house, and I was not their drudge. Boiling over, I told Nella to take a message downstairs. In effect, the message was: ‘Drop dead.’

A few minutes later, having collapsed on my bed in a weary heap, I heard the sound of footsteps plodding up the stairs. Then, more sprightly than I’d yet seen her, the angry old hag burst into the room. In a red-faced rage, she threw a frightful tantrum. Unleashing a stream of undecipherable Russian that caused drool to run out of her mouth and down her chin, she went ballistic, yanking clothes out of my suitcases and littering the floor with them. She did the same with the bed linens, pulling them off the bed—even with me on them—in a rather amazing display of strength for someone of her age.

I was terrified that this madwoman might tear me limb from limb. But, having blown off all her steam with this psychotic rant—and possibly having been cautioned by her son Oleg not to harm me—she seemed to have had enough of me and clambered out of the room, still shrieking. I just sat on the now-bare mattress, my knees pulled up under my chin, shaking as the daylight began to dissolve and the room became a shroud of darkness.

I was frozen, statue-like, in that pose for what felt like an hour, until Marusia came in and turned on a light. She was the only one in the house who was always kind to me, and I tried to explain to her in

pidgin Russian about the babushka and the windows. I don't know if she fully understood, but when she heard the word babushka, she suddenly spat on the floor. I could see in her eyes how much she detested the old crank.

She motioned 'come' and took me downstairs to the kitchen, where she all but forced me to eat something. By now, I had lost so much weight that I looked skeletal, yet I could only hold down a few pieces of cold pasta. She left me alone to go tend to her kids, and I sat there forlornly, head in my hands, staring vacantly at the blackness outside the kitchen window, until after a few minutes, Nella came bouncing in, toting a boom box. She sat down next to me and began playing a tape of Whitney Houston. The song was 'The Greatest Love of All,' and when I heard the first few words, 'I believe the children are our future …,' I went all to pieces thinking that I might not see my children again.

Nella, who apparently loved this song, asked me if I could translate the words into Russian for her. I went upstairs and got a little red book Danny and I had brought with us on the trip, Russian Made Simple, and for half an hour tried to find the right words and phrases in the book. Then, involuntarily, out of pure emotion, I started to sing along, half crying and half laughing at the absurdity that I would feel like singing at a moment like this—yet unable to stop because feeling the passion in it, feeling life as I had not for six days, made me feel good inside. Nella just sat staring at me, as if she thought I was daft, but when I broke out crying and moaning, 'I just want to go home,' over and over, I could see her eyes well up with tears. That's when she decided she had better things to do and left, taking the boom box with her.

I was feeling very melancholy. I looked at my watch. It was getting late, around 9pm. Most of the women and kids who had come to the house that morning were now gone, and the men still had not returned.

Where was Danny? Where had they taken him? Should I be worried? Would they even tell me if they had killed him?

Never had I felt so alone.

Lost in introspection, nearly in a catatonic state, I looked up after a while and was startled when my eyes met those of the ogre-like Sascha. I had not even noticed that he had come in and pulled up a seat next to me at the table. Snapping out of my haze, I jumped in my seat. I got up and fled back upstairs.

The Snake followed a few steps behind, but, to my relief, he veered off into the lounge and turned on the television. In the bedroom, I sat on the bed, consumed by the lingering image of those malevolent black eyes staring back at me. I kept my gaze trained on

the cloth tacked to the archway of the door, hoping to God I wouldn't see him again. Hearing the television, I figured he had found something else to stare at. Eventually, trying to relax, I slid back on the bed and propped my head against the pillow, flush against the wall. My eyes closed for a moment.

Just then, the cloth flew open, and the Snake was in the doorway. He pulled something from behind his back. I squinted at it, and that mortifyingly familiar cold chill went through me when I recognised it as the antique ceremonial sword I had seen before, mounted on the living room wall. Waving it around like a clumsy Samurai, he approached the bed, with the same smirk he'd worn when he came in and whispered in my ear the first night, when he had subsequently come in and mounted me only to recede when I called out to his wife Masha.

As I gasped and bolted upright, the razor-sharp tip of the blade was resting on my neck. I tried not to move, even to breathe or swallow, but then he drew the sword back and flung it onto the bed. At the same time, he pushed me flat, crosswise across the unmade mattress.

It was a sickening déjà vu. I was in the same position as the last time. Again his dirty fingernails dug into my skin under my sweater. I thought of calling out to Masha again, but his other hand was over my mouth. He lifted it only to make a throat-slashing gesture and point to the sword, the cold shaft of which was pressing against my leg.

As much as I had tried to extract the horrendous thought that I would at some point be raped in this hell house full of leering, reptilian men, it never really left my mind. It was just so logical under the circumstances—especially now with Danny and the other gangsters out of the house. Still, I refused to believe it would happen. There was logic in that, too. He was just trying to scare me; that's what these people liked to do, psychologically torture you without carrying through one of their ugly scenarios. Besides, someone would have to be nearby—Masha, Marusia, even the babushka. My God, could this mangy creature be so sick that he would actually do this with his wife in the same house?

He didn't seem to care. He grabbed at my sweater, trying to pull it off, but I was lying on it so solidly it didn't budge. Instead he lifted it up so that my stomach was exposed, then yanked my sweatpants and underwear down to my ankles. I could see his belt was undone, his zipper open. With one large hand, he pinned my wrists above my head.

Please, God, I begged silently, let Oleg come back with Danny right now. Let this pig hear the gate, the door opening, any sound that would stop him. Please let this be the end of the game.

Things were happening before my eyes in slow motion. My body and my thoughts were shutting down as they had when I was kidnapped. I couldn't think or move. I was living every woman's worst nightmare, in suspended animation and reality, somewhere between fact and denial.

Instinctively, I tried to kick with my legs. Angered by this, he took his free hand and slapped me across the cheek. It cracked like a bullwhip, but I had willed my body into a hard shell, blotting out everything I could. He pried my legs apart. I knew what would happen next. I didn't want to feel it.

When it did, I stared blankly at the ceiling. Seconds passed like hours, though it probably took no longer than thirty seconds before he was off me, pulling up his pants. It was over. I felt absolutely numb inside. Maybe, I lied to myself, it wouldn't count if I didn't react; maybe the memory would fade. So I refused to move or divert my eyes from the ceiling. I wouldn't look up at that grotesque face. No, he wouldn't get that satisfaction. He hadn't raped a woman; he had raped a cadaver, a block of stone. That would be his memory.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him pick up the sword. If he had plunged it into me, I wouldn't have felt it. But he didn't. He merely walked out, apparently contented with himself. I was again alone. That was a comfort. I pulled up my pants. Reality was returning to my senses. I hurt. I was sick to my stomach. I had to get to the bathroom, to be sick, to wash him out of me.

Unsteadily, I got myself to my feet and walked into the bathroom. Again, there was no water. Those goddamned pipes. So I walked down the stairs carrying a sponge to dip into the water-filled milk container I knew would be in the lower bathroom. It was around ten o'clock. The house was still, empty, deathly. Where was everybody? Where was that pig Sascha? Had he crawled into bed out of guilt to be with Masha and pretended nothing happened? Why wasn't anyone watching me? Was it a slip-up or did they just assume they had me trained not to do anything stupid—such as getting out the door and disappearing into the night.

If it was the latter, they were right. I was dependably trained. Not that they were taking any chances—the front door was bolted by so many locks it would have taken forever to get them all open. But they knew me, knew my thought processes, knew my love for Danny. The escape option would only be viable if he was there with me. Together, we may have made a brave and probably spectacularly stupid break for freedom if we saw an opening. But I could never have done that alone. At that moment, what I wanted above all else was to know he was safe. I had to see him brought back alive.

I walked meekly to the big pot of water. I took off my pants and

underwear and ran the wet sponge over my lower body, washing out the stench and the grime. Then I put my pants back on and found my way back upstairs.

The house was oppressively hot, and my cheeks felt like they were burning, particularly the one Sascha had slapped. But my hands and feet were ice cold. I was shivering. I thought I might be going through the first stage of shock. I also knew I had to snap out of it—or at least pretend to and strike a calm outward demeanor. If I didn't, Danny would know something was terribly wrong, and I might blurt out what the Snake had done to me.

And I couldn't. For one thing, Danny would freak out. He would want to kill the Snake with his bare hands, and that would surely get us both killed. He would have to stay cool—we both would—to be focused on the next call to Ian.

We couldn't blow it now.

Even if we got out of this alive, I still wouldn't tell him. It would hurt him, more than it hurt me. Maybe someday I would. But not now, not tomorrow. Not for a lot of tomorrows.

My heart soared when, at around midnight, the door finally opened, and Oleg and his toadies poured back in—with Danny looking oddly happy when he ambled into the bedroom. However, as if on cue, when the babushka heard the men enter, she emerged from her room, having evidently been just waiting for Oleg to get back so she could report to him my insolence about not cleaning the windows; she couldn't wait to inform on me. I had been afraid that disobeying the old loon would have dire consequences, and within minutes, my fears were realised when Oleg walked into our bedroom, looking as enraged and sounding as deranged as had his mother. I winced and grabbed onto Danny's arm. How much more abuse was I going to endure on this dreadful day?

This time, though, I was spared—by the grace of the sympathetic Marusia, who was outside the room in the upstairs hallway with her husband, Boris, and came charging in pleading with Oleg to leave me be, whereupon he backed off and left, to the consternation of the babushka, who had clearly wanted to see me suffer for my audacity in challenging her authority.

A bit irrationally, and only within my own thoughts, I asked myself where Marusia had been a few hours ago, when I really needed her? Had she in fact known what Sascha was doing and been too frightened to intervene? Was she more afraid of a sexual predator—and genuine psycho—like Sascha than she was of a more 'proper' gangster like Oleg? I could only guess about her motivations, yet I was in no position to quibble. She quite likely saved me from a terrible beating. And I was heartily grateful.

That night, I cuddled up to Danny until the morning came, keeping my secret buried inside me. Thank God he didn't know. And thank God we were together. We would face another day together. Right now, that was good enough.

'HELP THESE PEOPLE'

It was now Saturday afternoon on the eastern seaboard of the United States. Hours before, Ian had dutifully followed Ingrisano's suggestion and called the Australian Embassy in Moscow. He reported the story to an embassy secretary, received a noncommittal response, and hung up believing he had wasted his time. His nerves were already fraying, his fears growing.

Was anything really happening that would keep Yvonne and Danny alive? The FBI guys were helpful, sincerely concerned, but they were woefully helpless when it came to making something happen in Russia. Was he really going to have to raise $1.6 million to get them out? Goddamn that Miasnikov. He'd have to answer for this.

The Raymans had travel plans for the weekend: a visit to Wendy's mother in Philadelphia. They would stay at a hotel on Saturday night and return on Sunday, leaving the kids with their housekeeper. At least it would give them a chance for their heads to clear and be fresh for the Monday phone call.

When they checked in to the hotel after the three-hour drive, Ian called home for any messages. The housekeeper read them off. One was from Jerry Shestak. Holy Christ, Ian thought, I forgot all about him. He called Shestak, who asked if anything was happening with regard to the Weinstocks. Ian told him of the helpful but limited involvement of the FBI and of the tepid response from the Australians.

'Damn it,' Jerry bellowed. 'Useless! They're all useless!' He then repeated what he had said the day before, about the young apprentice Russian lawyer in his office, Dimitry Afanasiev.

'Call him, right now,' he instructed, giving Ian the phone number for the lawyer's home in Philadelphia. 'I spoke to him about it. He may be your only shot.'

What did he have to lose? Ian thought. He dialed the number. When Afanasiev answered, he eschewed pleasantries to get right to the heart of the matter. With an understated brashness and a swaggering air of confidence, he spoke with an unhurried sense of calm, but his words bit the air hard.

'I believe I can help you,' he said, 'but I need to know the whole

story. Tell me everything.'

At just twenty-three, Dimitry O. Afanasiev had come a long way. Olive-skinned, dark-eyed, round-faced, and cherubic-shaped, he looked like a naïf, yet he was sharp in intellect and burning with ambition. Fluent in Russian and English, he had earned an undergraduate law degree from the University of Leningrad in 1989, and then worked for a time in the Leningrad prosecutor's office. A born lawyer, and self-promoter, he vaulted past other fledgling young law students to get into the foreign-study program, landing scholarships to the prestigious law schools, first the University of Pittsburgh, then the University of Pennsylvania.

Not content merely filling up space in lecture halls, he got real-world experience doing an apprenticeship with major law firms in Philadelphia, beginning at Harrison, Segal & Lewis before Jerry Shestak recruited him in 1991. By year's end, even though he was still in law school at Penn, he was promoted to an associate at Wolf, Block, Schorr & Solis-Cohen.

Afanasiev was valuable to Shestak for the contacts he had made as a novice prosecutor back home. He could call upon not only influential Russian attorneys but also people he'd had to work with while putting cases together before the fall of Communism—both low- and high-level KGB apparatchiks. Though the agency—or at least that dreaded three-letter insignia for it—was now past-tense, some of those people were still around in the new Agency for Federal Security and its many affiliated tentacles. Others, having leeched onto Russian businesses, were no less valuable to Shestak's American corporate clients.

After speaking with Ian, Shestak had a very different kind of assignment for Dimitry—and a pro bono one at that—to put his contacts to use saving the lives of two people back in his native country. Relating the Weinstocks' plight, he barked at the startled young man, 'Help these people!'

Typically unflappable, Dimitry accepted the task with little outward emotion. Well, he thought to himself, it's more exciting than the corporate law stuff I am working on.

Shestak, who could read the laconic Russian better than anyone, knew that for Dimitry this was all but a formal declaration of war. The kid was ready to go into full battle mode on behalf of the Weinstocks.

This was something Ian discovered as soon as he spoke with Dimitry. Like a prosecutor, Dimitry wouldn't quit pumping him for

information until every detail was covered to his satisfaction. For two hours, the grilling went on. Finally, his yellow legal pad streaked with notes, he made a vow to Ian.

'I will personally work with you until this case is solved, and I will do this as quickly as possible,' he said. 'It is now 11:30pm in Moscow, so I will start immediately. There are people I can contact who I can trust. We will have to investigate the business and this Miasnikov fellow. We will have to set up direct contacts. I will keep you posted.'

The next sound was a click. Ian, burned out by the interrogation, slumped back on the hotel room bed and stretched his limbs. Lord, he thought, that kid is like a human buzzsaw. But is he for real? Could he actually get something done, or was it all hot air? Would he even hear from him again?

For Dimitry, it was indeed a personal challenge. Not that he regarded the FBI as useless, but he firmly believed the fate of Yvonne and Danny Weinstock rested squarely on his shoulders. Dimitry knew something was needed that reached beyond the ways, means, and inclinations of the FBI and the governments of Australia and America. Dr Rayman was quite disturbed about it. He complained that the Australian Federal police and the FBI were not taking his concerns for his relatives in Russia seriously. They had almost laughed at him when he said that the reason he thought his relatives were taken hostage was because Daniel Weinstock had inquired about the health of relatives who were known to have died a long time before. Although Dr Rayman thought he was being sent a message that the conversation was controlled, he felt nobody took him seriously or showed any desire to help.

He came to the law firm, as a last resort, in the hope that Wolf Block's involvement would get the US government moving. Jerry Shestak and Dimitry had a Russian capability that could be helpful. To be honest, as Dimitry recalled, it was only when the FBI learned that a powerful law firm had become involved that they decided they had better become more involved in the case. However, Dimitry could not wait for them to move. He had to do something. Right after he spoke with Dr Rayman, he laid out his Russian address and phone books in front of him and made a strong pot of coffee. He knew it would be a long night.

14

DAY SEVEN:
SUNDAY, JANUARY 12th
THE DACHA, PHILADELPHIA, AND MOSCOW

After the convulsions of the previous day, Sunday was mercifully uneventful. Not that Oleg and his snarling mother weren't still seething at me for having stood up to her about the window-washing matter, but it seemed that on Sundays everything in the house shut down in a mass slumber. I did, too. Starved, exhausted, and violated, my body just succumbed to a tide of sleep at around 2am, not to awaken until around noon. Those were ten hours of blessed escape. I only wish it had been longer.

In the early afternoon, Oleg's wife, Rae, came to the dacha with a woman she identified as her mother, another white-haired, big-boned Russian woman, as well as a young woman with square glasses whose name was Natasha. She was the nanny for Piotr and the baby, Sascha, and as such was a rare luxury in Russia. But then Oleg, for a low-life punk, evidently enjoyed the perks of life as a Mob boss. Evidently, he had several homes in and around Moscow, and most likely came to the dacha either to visit the babushka or when he needed a place to stash people like Danny and me when the situation arose.

The latter notion gave me chills. Considering the memory seared into my mind of the babushka diligently hanging up that noose, I wondered how many other victims had been trapped within the walls here, and for how many those walls had been the last thing they ever saw.

All that afternoon, the men and women kept their distance from each other. They kept to separate orbits, the women and kids downstairs chattering like hens, the men upstairs in the lounge huddled around the television smoking cigarettes, coughing, spitting, and arguing about who knows what. Since the men were too lazy to get up and keep an eye on us in the bedroom, we were invited into the lounge to watch with them. At first, it was harmless enough. Clicking the remote endlessly—apparently a trait common to men no matter where in the world—images flashed across the screen of various aspects of Russian life. At one point, though, a tennis match came on, ironically, from Australia.

Of course, this evoked a great deal of homesickness, making me think about our kids back home—and also underscoring the fact that Danny's youngest son, Jonathan, happened to be staying with Ian and Wendy. We were sure the Raymans had taken pains to shield all the kids from the phone calls going on between Russia and Wayne. We had in fact assumed that Ian and Wendy had been told by whomever they were working with not to let word out to anyone that we were in trouble, not even to our housekeeper, Susan, back in Brighton. If so, such a blackout on our whereabouts and our situation may have seemed cruel to our families, but it was absolutely essential to any hope that we might be rescued. We could only imagine what would befall us if word leaked out to the Australian media of our kidnapping. Grigory Miasnikov was no doubt communicating regularly with the people in the Melbourne office; any hint that the authorities were working on our case would surely have meant the gang had no shot at collecting any money. And that would mean our usefulness, and any reason to be kept alive, was over. The next step at that point would be to dump our bodies somewhere in the Russian wilderness.

After six days, I could sense that the gang was getting quite impatient and was just itching for our blood. In fact, we probably had been brought into the television room not for our pleasure but expressly to be made aware of how bloodthirsty they were. Not by coincidence, I'm sure, after watching those non-threatening programs, they began to sort through a pile of video tapes, all of them movies with a similar theme: gory content.

The first one they put into the VCR was The Krays, a blood-soaked British film about true-life twin brothers who ran the London Mob in the '60s. After keeping their eyes glued to every brutal moment, they put on Havana, starring Robert Redford, who plays a gambler in pre-Castro Cuba and gets caught up with barbaric revolutionaries. For me, it was more amusing than grisly watching the Russian versions of these movies, in which a single, monotonous Russian voice dubbed all the parts, male and female. But for us, the real moral of the stories was clearly meant to be that we would meet the same fate as the celluloid victims. Danny and I had our own name for these movies. We called them 'Mafia training films.' It was wry, but true.

For this small-time Mob, some of whom we were certain would turn tail and run rather than stand and fight at the first sign of real danger, these were no less than training sessions. Even their language and facial expressions would rub off from the last movie they had seen. Some Mob, we thought. Sometimes they were more suited to a Monty Python movie than The Godfather. And yet, as inept as they could seem, these same bumblers carried very serious weapons, and

they had our lives in their hands. The question was whether that was good or bad for us.

Curiously, Oleg did not watch movies with the others. Perhaps he thought he needed no further instructions in the mobster lifestyle and, as the boss, would not deign to be in the same room when such indoctrination was going on. Or maybe he was more into light comedies. When he wanted the tube for himself, however, it was his. Halfway through Havana, he came into the room, stopped the tape, and turned on a channel that featured a gypsy variety show, which was a kind of torture in itself to see. Gladly, for us, we were ordered out of the room. Back in the bedroom, I took my usual position, on my knees in front of the window, gazing at the snowcapped streets below. That was my entertainment for the rest of the afternoon, and my whimsies about somehow being free of this place and these people were more enjoyable than all the gypsy folk dancing from Moscow to Minsk.

That night, Danny and I again hashed out what we might tell Ian the next day when we would return to the grave business of buying ourselves more time to stay alive. We felt we had done ourselves some good by dropping the clue about Uncle Chaim and Auntie Tova the last time, though we had no inkling about what, if anything, was being done on our behalf all the way around the world. We did know Ian had picked up on it. Now, we figured we had to get through to him that we were indeed in mortal and immediate danger, and that this was no business debt but rather a common kidnapping and ransom.

To do that, we needed to drop another clue—and maybe gain some luck that we couldn't foresee. We tried out various lines, but they were too subtle or too obvious, too easy for Robert to see what we were trying to do. We were beginning to get frustrated. We knew we might have only one shot to drop a good clue before the door would slam shut.

Then it came to me. I recalled what my initial reflex reaction was when we'd been taken hostage just outside of Sheremetyevo Airport, when, forced into the back of that baleful Zil, guns pointed at my belly, I had instinctively grabbed my stomach and said, 'Baby. Baby.' While it had not spared me from being beaten, and even kicked in my stomach, I was not completely sure the gang didn't believe I was in fact pregnant. I could use that cover now.

It was a fail-safe line to use with Ian, for two reasons. As a

pediatrician, it was a natural subject to broach with him. What's more, he would know I was lying. He knew that after I had nearly died giving birth to Melanie, my doctor had warned me not to become pregnant again, and that I underwent a tubal ligation—a procedure commonly known as having the fallopian tubes tied. Thus, if I could make references about being pregnant to Ian, who of course knew otherwise, he would pick up on the lie, hopefully without flinching or saying anything to the contrary. Certainly the rest of the gang, who had heard it before, wouldn't even blink. Or so I hoped.

But was I being too cute, too slick? Was I pushing my luck?

Time would tell. If I could speak to Ian, I would run with it. I decided not to tell Danny of the idea. I didn't want it to come off as too contrived, too planned. I thought it would be more spontaneous if he heard me say it at the same moment everyone else did. I debated with myself all that night about whether I was right or wrong to make that decision on my own, and whether to do it at all. Unlike the night before, I didn't sleep a wink.

There was no more time left to lose myself in dreams.

DIMITRY AND THE COLONEL

Nine hours behind, Dimitry Afanasiev wouldn't sleep that day or for another night, either. Sitting at a desk in his small Philadelphia apartment, draining cups of black coffee, he kept the phone at his ear for hours. Having committed himself to the unlikely transcontinental rescue mission of two people he didn't even know, he talked his way through a chain of Russian intelligence and law enforcement bureaucrats.

Unfortunately, having been away from Moscow for two years—a critical span given that it coincided with the first shaky steps of post-Communist reformation—he had to chart a whole new road map. To be sure, things were a lot less complicated when the KGB ruled all facets of the intelligence and security. In the year since the KGB was decertified, the agency wasn't restructured as much as it was subdivided under the aegis of two interrelated umbrella agencies, the Ministry of Security, or MBR (the spies), and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, or MVD (the cops). Carved even further into a maze of sub-agencies, people who did basically the same thing could belong to a half-dozen different agencies, or 'directorates,' and report to twenty different superiors. Of the 400,000 working at the KGB in its last year, only 137,000 now remained at the MBR; it would atrophy to 80,000

within two more years.

By contrast, the MVD benefited from the end of the Cold War and the subsequent explosion of crime throughout the country. It housed the police, militia, and special troops, whose ranks swelled to 540,000. But they were poorly paid and trained, and easy marks for corruption. With better-paying jobs on the outside, in business or organised crime, agents had begun to stream out the doors. Others remained on the job—and on the take. As it was, no one could really be sure who was friend and who was foe.

This was the minefield Dimitry had to navigate in finding someone clean enough to be able to lead and coordinate a genuine rescue strategy, who wouldn't double-deal with the Weinstocks' lives. Adding to the difficulties, it was the weekend so offices in Moscow were mostly empty. He had to wheedle home numbers for people, many of whom weren't there either, having gone off to their own country dachas.

Rather than work up from the bottom of the spy barrel, he began by going first to the most highly placed government officials he had dealt with while in the prosecutor's office in Leningrad: Foreign Minister Andre Kozyrev and Boris Puginsky, the deputy chief justice of Russia. From both men, he elicited permission to use them as references in order to pierce the veil of proprietary information at the intelligence bureaus, where people didn't know him and would otherwise brush him off. It worked. Liberally dropping the names of Kozyrev and Puginsky, his search for a saviour unearthed some receptive ears but also more than a few dead ends.

By late Sunday afternoon, through a long night and morning, a consensus candidate emerged that seemed ideal, or at least dependably uncorrupt. He was a lieutenant colonel in the Main Directorate for Organised Crime, or GUOP—one of the branches of the MVD that dealt with the Moscow mobs, working with the MVD's rapid-response units in cases such as contract killings and kidnappings. The colonel's name was Vladimir Borisovich Rushailo. He had racked up some high-visibility busts.

Rushailo had a rather roguish reputation. In his early forties, he was seasoned, fearless. His men would run through walls on his order. He was decisive, but also vainglorious. Looking for the big score and a big headline, he hated deskwork; he craved being in the thick of the hunt for criminals. Some said he had an itchy trigger finger. Handed the Weinstock case, Rushailo jumped at the chance to rescue the couple—and, not incidentally, to garner some heavy glory for himself in such a history-making endeavor. That impulse, in fact, seemed to drive him in general.

Dimitry had heard of Rushailo's exploits, but he still fretted. He'd

heard horror stories about the organised-crime section, about how officers making peanuts and outgunned by the mobs had quit and gone into private 'security' jobs with the gangs. Bribes were rampant in the office, battering the force's credibility with the public. If the gang that had taken the Weinstocks prisoner was audacious enough to kidnap Western businesspeople, was it not plausible that they had laid a foundation of greased palms in law enforcement?

Nonetheless, there was no time to look for potential pitfalls. Action was required—now.

It was now 11pm Sunday night in Moscow. Rushailo, a workaholic, was in his office at the MVD. Having been briefed on the gist of the case, Rushailo began to ponder strategies. The mission itself wasn't problematic, he realised. As unprecedented as the case was, the rub was in ironing out all the conflicting jurisdictions and diplomatic protocols. If the FBI was working on the case in America, they would have to share information with Rushailo's people—something that would necessitate official authorisation from the American government. Rushailo figured he may as well have been asking for the moon given that the two countries hadn't worked together in any capacity since World War II. Why would they do so now?

He thought for a moment. If it couldn't be done the diplomatic way, there was a simple way: he could go over to the American Embassy and make the request. The very notion made him shudder. Never before had Rushailo or any other high-level Russian intelligence operative entered that longtime enemy outpost. But the groundbreaking aspect of such a visit made him excited as well. Besides, they'd have to hear him out, he figured. If they turned him away, the blood of those Australians would be on the Americans' hands, not the Russians'.

Dimitry, tipped off to Rushailo's intentions by his contacts, decided he would help pave the colonel's way by alerting the embassy beforehand. Late Sunday night, he made a conference call from Philadelphia to the embassy, with Ian Rayman on the line in Wayne, relating yet again the details of the calls from Yvonne and Danny Weinstock. One of the duty officers took note of the story, but cautioned that they could not take any action on the matter because the FBI had no legal presence at the embassy. In any case, he added, he couldn't recall a time when anyone there had ever spoken to the Russian police.

'Let me assure you,' Dimitry told him, 'that is going to change very soon.'

Knowing that the Russian colonel would be at the embassy's door within a few hours, he only wished that he could be a fly on the wall when that fateful moment arrived.

15

DAY EIGHT:
MONDAY, JANUARY 13th
MOSCOW, WASHINGTON DC, PHILADELPHIA, WAYNE, AND THE DACHA

'A CASE OF INTEREST TO BOTH OF OUR COUNTRIES'

On Monday morning, Rushailo called a major into his office, the head of the MVD's organised crime unit named Bryzgalov. They discussed the case and its personnel and paramilitary options, though they could take no action until either the FBI had been granted authorisation to share information or did its part by providing a name, phone number, and location, the bits and pieces that would build a trail to the kidnappers and the Weinstocks. Before wrapping up the discussion, Rushailo had one last end to tie up. 'This fellow Miasnikov, of SovAustralTechnicka,' he said. 'See what you can dig up on him.'

Minutes later, at around 8am, the two officers, clad in dark business suits and hounds tooth overcoats, climbed into a department staff car. With Bryzgalov at the wheel, the twenty-minute drive from the Ministry headquarters at 5 Ivanteevskaia Street to the US Embassy complex at 19 Chaykovskovo Street was easy. Even for roughriders like them, the weight of the moment was a bit daunting, their chests thumping under their coats. Rushailo wondered aloud if they would even be allowed through the embassy gate. Only two years ago, the KGB was supplanted.

Back then, by implication, the Weinstocks would have been goners, their plight unable to bridge the wide gulf between Russian and American intelligence orbits during the Cold War. Although KGB records had been sealed so as not to stain any ex-agents' reputations, it was entirely plausible that both Rushailo and Bryzgalov had KGB backgrounds. Yet now, only a few years on, they may have wondered if during the course of this case they might run into some of their old confederates who were now on the opposite side of the law. If so, that would be beyond irony.

It wouldn't be the first time they had pondered the eventuality of pulling the trigger and taking out people they knew. Such was life in

post-Communist Russia. Indeed, as the car made the turn onto Chaykovskovo Street, Rushailo pointed out a shambling three-level building that sat directly across the road from the embassy. With his encyclopedic knowledge of the underworld, he knew rogue ex-KGB agents were still using the building, to monitor calls in and out of the embassy, and possibly conversations in bugged offices. By going into the embassy, would Rushailo be dropping information to the wrong people? It was just one complicating factor of this bizarre case.

Upon reaching the grounds of the enormous embassy, the car stopped at the main entrance gate. When an attendant approached, Rushailo rolled down the window and displayed his police credentials. In broken English, he uttered a sentence that would have profound international impact.

'We are here to discuss with you a case of interest to both of our countries.'

The attendant was at a loss, never having heard an entreaty of this kind from a Russian official. Not knowing who should handle it, he told Rushailo to wait in the driveway while he summoned a duty officer from the political affairs sector, who quickly came out and escorted the two Russians past the guardhouse and through the front doors. Inside, they were patted down and told to place their handguns on a table. A metal-detecting wand was circled around them. Rushailo and Bryzgalov looked at each other with wan smiles, sharing the same thought: So this is how common criminals are made to feel.

It was, surely, a strange vibe all around. Here were two high-level Russian intelligence officers—who likely were the subject of a couple of dossiers on file somewhere in this building—on turf that was only recently off-limits to men with their murky background. Old suspicions were not about to die so soon. The Americans' innards growled as the pair strolled about the embassy floors, no doubt taking mental notes about what they saw.

Ushered into an office in the political affairs division, the gazes of embassy personnel trained hard on them, they sat side-by-side facing five American diplomatic officers and a translator. What, Rushailo was asked, did he want from them to help get these two people rescued? His answer was simple, yet exceedingly complicated and sticky from the diplomatic worldview: official authorisation to receive proprietary information that the FBI would elicit in those phone calls from Moscow. Based on that information, Rushailo's elite police unit could roust the gang and free their hostages.

Rushailo had the Americans over a barrel, and he knew it. How could they refuse? Doing so would leave them with blood on their hands should the Weinstocks be killed. Damn, these two guys look so goddamn smug, the Americans thought. They're really enjoying

themselves. Hell, they're acting like they own this place!

Indeed, when the meeting ended, Rushailo and Bryzgalov all but floated out of the office. The epic visit was over, a half-hour interlude that is still the only one of its kind—yet one rarely if ever spoken of by embassy denizens. To this day, for those who were there or who later heard about it, the meeting on January 13, 1992, has a kind of ephemeral quality, more like fiction than fact. Though rightly proud of their role in the story, there is a palpable unease about the day the Russians penetrated those pristine walls.

For the two Russian officers, however, there was a giddy sense of accomplishment. As they collected their guns and walked back to their car, savouring every step, they knew they had accomplished what they came there for. The rescue mission would have a Russian face. It was their stage now.

But that meant they were under the gun, too. Failure was not an option.

Once the Russians were out the door, the authorisation request made its way up the embassy ladder, headed by Ambassador Robert Strauss. As it happened, only days before, January 3rd, the United States officially established diplomatic relations with the Russian Federation. That would make all the difference in the world, lending urgency to the request. By mid-afternoon Monday, the international telephone and telex lines to Washington DC crackled. The Justice and State Departments deliberated the request, scouring the file on the case as well as archival microfilm looking for any case through the years similar to this.

While nearly everyone agreed to approve the embassy's request for FBI assistance—something that had never been requested before—intense and frequently heated discussions bubbled, debating whether the Russians could possibly lift classified FBI operating procedures. Some hard-liners were dead set against giving the Russians so much as the time of day. They just couldn't be trusted, they swore. Should we really let them know how good—or bad—our call-tracing technology is? We'd be playing ball with KGB people under a different name. They'd be asking us prying questions. More than one department head repeated the same line like a mantra: 'I don't like it.'

'Besides,' some of the same critics demurred, 'how believable is this crazy story anyway about Australians being held hostage over some fertiliser sale? Even the Australian government doesn't believe it. Maybe these Weinstock people just want to dig up some money.'

For now, pending further events, it was decided to let the family handle things on its own. The FBI would continue recording the calls from Moscow. The bureau would have a channel open to the embassy. But as for the Russians sharing information, well, they said, let's think about it some more.

In Moscow, where it was almost midnight now, Rushailo was chafing that no word had come from the embassy that he could contact the FBI. Danny Weinstock, he knew from Dimitry Afanasiev, would be making the next call to America sometime that night. If only Rushailo could get his hands on the information that would come from that call, he could move, maybe even ending this thing tonight. Instead, he and his men sat in the MVD, not knowing where to go. They could take a flyer and stake out this Grigory Miasnikov fellow at the office on Chekhova Street. But he found it implausible that the kidnappers would go there again, for a third time. If it turned out to be a dead end, it would tip off the gang that the cops were on their tails. That could be disastrous to the Weinstocks. But if they weren't at Chekhova Street, where were they? Damn, if only he could get some information from those uncooperative Americans.

Rushailo was spitting mad, feeling completely betrayed. Suddenly, he wasn't envisioning headlines about him busting the gang; the headlines he imagined were of the corpses of the Australian couple being found off some desolate road. What fools, those Americans! he thought. Do they know they're sending these people to their death?

He could only put his itchy trigger finger to work on his telephone touchpad, calling the only person whose number he did have in America, Dimitry Afanasiev, who after hearing Rushailo's tirade also expressed disgust at the paralysis of the Americans.

Dimitry's understanding was that the US Embassy in Moscow seized up in bureaucratic shock and went into a slumber waiting for instructions from Washington that weren't forthcoming. So everything stopped on the Americans' part.

The Russians, though, were not in the mood to wait. They wanted to do something, get the wheels turning. They were desperate to get information from the FBI. Right from the beginning, people in the MVD had asked Dimitry to put them in direct touch with the FBI, but the FBI man, Gerry Ingrisano, refused to deal with them directly because he had no orders from above to establish direct links with the Russians.

Ingrisano knew of Dimitry through Dr Rayman. Ingrisano knew of his contacts in Russia. They spoke, briefly, but nothing came of it. There was nothing he could do to pass information to the Russians. His hands were tied. There was nothing the embassy could do, nothing anybody in an official capacity could do, not the Americans, not the Australians. Nobody.

On Dimitry's part, he had no choice but to become involved. He would have to mediate between Dr Rayman and the Russians. If he didn't do this, they would get nowhere. Those people would never come out of it alive. The truth of the matter is, once Dimitry became involved, neither the FBI nor the American Embassy had a clue about what was going on. They may have thought they were doing something important toward the rescue of the Weinstocks, but they weren't. It was out of their hands.

THE MONDAY CALL

Ian and Wendy evidently agreed with Dimitry's low estimation of the FBI. Without informing Gerry Ingrisano, they agreed to feed information about the impending call from Moscow to Dimitry via a second phone line they had in the house. Periodically during the call, Wendy would go to an upstairs bedroom and repeat what was being said on the other line in the kitchen. In turn, Dimitry would have his own second line open to a switchboard at the MVD, where the data would be routed to a department to be processed—phone numbers matched with known underworld figures, addresses, etc.—then relayed to Rushailo, who'd be out in a police cruiser waiting for a location to raid.

At around 5pm, Ingrisano, Joe McShane, and Tom Cottone arrived at the house and set up the equipment. Ian knew the drill back and forth: Keep the call going. Be natural but persistent. Ask questions. Don't get angry or confrontational. Stay on an even keel, establish a comfort level, mention the money a lot, that you're still liquefying assets. Listen hard. Follow up, ask for numbers, places. Where are they being held? Who are they with? How many of them are there? And stall, stall, stall.

At around 11pm, the maddening wait was at last over. Finally, we

were going to make the call to Ian. We were taken from the house and piled into a car waiting outside the door. Oleg was at the wheel, Danny in front, and I was in the back with Boris. Behind us, Robert, Kuzin, and the one they called Orloff followed. The route was the same as the last time, on the same icy roads to Moscow. In an hour, we entered the city's business district, made the usual turns leading to Chekhova Street, and pulled up in front of number 25, where another car filled with gangsters rendezvoused with our car and the one behind us.

This was surprising and gave me a tingle of expectation. Could they really be taking us to the SovAustralTechnicka office yet again? Had I been wrong when I had assumed Robert had allowed Danny to leave the office phone as a call-back number only because he would never risk bringing us back there again? Maybe, I thought, I shouldn't get excited. Maybe everybody was in Robert's pocket in this town, anyway.

However, something was different about this visit. This time, Grigory Miasnikov wasn't standing in front of the building. Evidently, this was important because instead of getting out, Oleg, looking concerned, gunned the engine and took off again. Now my mind really began to percolate with questions. Was Grigory's absence a signal to the others to scramble? Were things getting too hot? Had they been found out? Had Grigory gotten himself captured? Was he singing to the cops right now?

Or did something happen between the different factions of the gang? Had Grigory's famous arrogance pushed the wrong button? Had he been 'silenced'? If so, was the fragile solidarity of the kidnappers coming apart after only a week? Would that mean they were now more desperate than ever? Would they even take us to make the call, or just get rid of us and end this ill-conceived caper before the night was out? All these notions flashed through my brain as the car careened down dark and desolate streets.

Fortunately, it didn't go to a secluded, wooded area. Instead, it slowed to a stop only about two miles away, in a neighbourhood of rundown, two- and three-storey apartment buildings, in front of a seemingly vacant building. We were then taken out of the car and rushed into a ground floor flat.

It was a typical Moscow residence—meaning it was a synonym for the words gloomy and depressing—if a bit larger than most of those we had seen. It was, perhaps, a hangout where Oleg did Mob business or a trysting place to cheat on Rae. Musty and unpainted, with an old linoleum floor, there was a living room and a bedroom. The only pieces of furniture in the living room was a solitary wooden stool, a backgammon set on an otherwise bare shelf, and a lamp with

no shade.

Of primary importance to Oleg were the unadorned windows. He kept looking out into the darkness of a courtyard alley as Robert took a telephone from a carry bag and plugged it into a live wall jack, then tapped in another phone with a line-splitter—the kind of thing he seemed to do with such dispatch that it struck me he must have been brought into the gang partly because he knew how to rig a phone to get a call out of Russia at any given time.

By the time the phones were working, the room was choked with clouds of cigarette smoke and charged with ions of high-energy tension. This, clearly, was to be the make-or-break point of the plot; either Robert would be convinced that the money was forthcoming, or he might well abort the whole thing. I was certain that if he had any doubt, our time would be up.

More chillingly, before handing Danny one of the phones, Robert told him what to say to Ian about our location—that we were not at the Checkhova street office because Grigory had gone to a relative's funeral. It seemed to be a particularly dark excuse, and given Grigory's absence, I could only think that if Miasnikov was indeed attending a funeral, it may have been his own.

Still, it also hit me that telling Ian this might well help us, as it would eliminate the office as a location for our whereabouts—particularly if we would be able to give him the number to where we were.

I took a seat on the stool, irrationally believing they would allow a woman the luxury of the only place to comfortably sit in the whole apartment. Oleg ended that notion by immediately shooing me off of it—so that the telephone could be placed on it. I then sat on the floor, coughing uncontrollably because of all the smoke. I looked at Oleg, who was again nervously standing by the window, and made an upward motion with my hands, hoping he would lift the glass, even if a crack. He ignored me.

With all ready, Danny began to dial.

WAYNE, NEW JERSEY

It was 2am in Moscow, 6pm in New Jersey. Though it had also been agreed that Ian would be calling the Chekhova Street office at 6pm, that plan was obviously no longer viable—something Ian and Gerry Ingrisano found out when Ian began to dial the number Danny had given him the last time. For the next half-hour, he heard only

endless ringing. Ian and Wendy were getting nervous. Ingrisano kept them calm. 'Just keep trying,' he repeated over and over.

During the same half-hour, Danny's calls to the house were yielding, curiously, nothing but busy signals. Finally, he tried another of the multiple lines Ian had, one that was his private number. When it rang, Wendy ran into the study to pick it up. She lifted the receiver and said nothing as she listened.

'Hello?' she heard. 'Is that you, Dr Rayman? It's Daniel Weinstock.'

Wendy was startled to hear Danny's voice on that line, but Ingrisano had prepared both her and Ian about what to do should they receive Danny's call—exactly what Ingrisano did not want to have happen, considering the far higher probability of tracing a location if Ian could call Danny. If Danny or Yvonne called, he had said, hang up without saying a word. She did. At this point, Gerry Ingrisano still believed the Weinstocks were at the same location as they were for the previous calls and that since they had just called, they would be there to answer Dr Rayman's call. It may have seemed a risky strategy and totally illogical to have hung up on Danny – but they wanted to hear from him and now were slamming down the phone on him. However, Gerry knew these kidnappers were greedy enough that they would wait all night if they had to. They weren't going to go anywhere until they heard what Dr Rayman had to say. Gerry felt confident that they were playing it right. But then when they still couldn't get through, his throat tightened a little.

Actually, Danny didn't even realise Wendy had hung up on him. Considering how difficult it was to get a stable phone line out of Moscow, he just thought the connection didn't go through. Repeated calls got nowhere. Attempting to break through the busy signals, Danny tried to get the international operator to break through and tell Ian there was an emergency call for him. Mystifyingly, Ian refused it.

'No, I won't accept the call,' he said. 'Tell him I'm trying to call him.'

Of course, that was impossible, since Ian had not the slightest idea where we were or what number we could be reached at. The continuing missed connections had now begun to irk Robert. It wasn't going to take much for him to believe that the Raymans were up to something.

I could sense his uneasiness. Needing to figure something out before Robert cut the call session short, Danny offered up one last option: to call Ian's pediatric office and leave a message. Robert consented, and after Danny dialed the office, a young associate of Ian's, Dr Alvin Edelstein answered the call. Danny identified himself and said he needed to speak with Ian urgently. Edelstein asked for the

number.

This, of course, was a potential pitfall for Robert—provided he had any reasonable doubts that he could ever be tracked down by the local authorities. But I could read the man's mind. If this was the only way to get Ian Rayman on the phone tonight, I'm sure he was thinking, then let him have the damn number. He asked Oleg what was the number. Oleg, looking pained that Robert had made the decision to reveal the number, recited it aloud, and Danny dictated it to Edelstein. Though I didn't know for sure what was going on at Ian's house at that very moment, when that number was passed, I couldn't help but think something important—and possibly beneficial to us—might have just occurred.

Gerry Ingrisano's throat had tightened even more after Ian, again at his insistence, spurned Danny's emergency breakthrough call. In his single-mindedness to initiate contact to Danny from Wayne, in order to enhance the odds of a trace, two calls from Danny had now been rejected. What if Danny wouldn't answer at Chekhova Street? What if he wasn't even there? Had Ingrisano pushed it too far?

Ian Rayman wondered about that, too. He couldn't believe what he had just said—that he wouldn't accept Danny's call because he was trying to call him instead.

Jesus, he mused, that had to be the single most illogical comment in the history of mankind.

Ian kept hitting the redial button. Still nothing. Then, out of nowhere, with the uncanny timing normally reserved for a cliffhanger scene in a whodunit movie, there was an audible tapping on the kitchen window. Turning their heads to the noise, Ian and Wendy recognised the figure of Alvin Edelstein silhouetted in the darkness outside after having driven over from the office to personally deliver the message he'd taken. Ingrisano told Ian to make it quick, and the doctor opened the back door a crack to take the note from Edelstein.

'Who is it, who called?' he asked.

'A man named Weinstock.'

Ian needed to catch himself before his jaw dropped at this incredible stroke of luck.

He politely thanked Edelstein, closed the door, and took the note inside to Ingrisano, who wondered if his hide had been saved by this seemingly divine intervention.

'We got it! This is just what we want! Okay,' he told Ian, flipping on his recording machine, 'let's get a trace.'

It was 6:30pm in Wayne, 2:30am in Moscow. His pulse racing, Ian dialed.

Everyone in the kitchen felt a feeling of immense relief when Danny Weinstock picked up at the other end of the line.

‘Danny! Where are you?’ Ian began. ‘I’ve been trying to call you, as we planned.’

‘We’re at a different place.’

‘You’re not at the Chekhova Street office?’

‘No. We couldn’t go there because Grigory Miasnikov had to attend a relative’s funeral.’

Changing gears, Ian went into a stalling tactic, as per Ingrisano’s instructions. ‘Tell me again,’ he said, ‘about the business transaction and why the money has to be paid. If you are with friends, why can’t you and Yvonne just go straight to the airport and leave Russia?’

Danny didn’t go along. ‘Please don’t ask any questions.’

‘Fine. Is Yvonne there with you? Can I speak with her?’

Robert nodded for Danny to say yes, I was there. Unlike the previous call, when Ian had asked to speak with me, Robert by now had reason to think I could handle it. It was imperative I do so in any case; Robert knew Ian would not move on the money if he thought I was already dead. Still, Robert felt he had to warn me. ‘Keep it short and sweet,’ he said. ‘Don’t cry or get upset.’

I was so nervous that I would say the wrong thing that my palms were heavy with sweat, and the phone nearly slipped out of my hands when Danny handed me the phone.

‘Hello, Dr Rayman,’ I began, my voice shaking a bit though I was able to maintain the same mechanical, unemotional tone Danny had mastered. Without wasting a moment, I went right into the clue I had thought up and debated with myself about delivering. Do it, I thought, before you can change your mind.

‘Dr Rayman, perhaps you can give me some medical advice. I am having severe stomach pains from the pregnancy. What do you suggest I do?’

I squeezed the receiver hard waiting for his response to the fallacious question. At the same time, I noticed Danny’s reaction. Thankfully, he had read what I was up to because he sat impassively, betraying no emotion. But would Ian get it? Finally, after what seemed like an hour, though it was only a few seconds, Ian had his answer.

‘Have you seen a doctor?’

He’d gotten it, too. Thank God.

‘No,’ I said.

‘You’d better see a doctor,’ he continued.

‘That’s not possible.’

‘The best thing to do is to keep warm, lie down, and rest.’

‘Thank you, Dr Rayman.’

I turned the phone back to Danny, still shaking but content that I’d accomplished something. I’d gotten through to him in no uncertain terms that I had been beaten and that we were in very pressing danger. Hopefully, that would prompt him to wring some vital information from Danny about our whereabouts. Through it all, Robert was none the wiser about what I was doing.

Danny seemed revitalised by my performance. I could feel his confidence growing as he found ways to keep the conversation going —it having been crystallised to us, if not Robert, that Ian and Wendy were not alone back in Wayne and that the call surely was being recorded and hopefully traced.

When Ian yet again asked for the details of the fertiliser trade, Danny didn’t hesitate or consult Robert before launching into an intentionally long-winded explanation that must have consumed a good fifteen minutes.

It helped that Robert at this point was only half paying attention, as he was engaged with Kuzin and Oleg in a series of discussions. Thus, Danny had a chance to pass more critical information, right under the gang’s noses.

The first nugget was when Ian asked if we were in danger. Of course, the last time the question was asked, Danny had stayed on script, overstating that we weren’t in the ‘minutest’ danger. Now, his reply was unvarnished and, I’m sure, jarring to Ian and whoever else was listening in.

‘Yes, very much,’ he said.

‘How many people are with you?’

‘Ten.’

Robert now turned back to the call, which he had apparently believed was merely tedious chatter. That minutes were being burned up was less important to him than if we could carry on a comfortable, even boring, conversation with Ian; that way, he would believe we weren’t being held by madmen. Robert even allowed me a last word on the phone after I asked if I could say a few words to Wendy. I clutched the receiver again and asked Ian to put her on. When she heard my voice, she nearly broke down.

‘Yvonne,’ she sighed, ‘we’re so worried about you.’

Once more, to leave no doubt about my underlying message, I used my pregnancy fib. Like Ian, she didn’t flinch.

‘Please, Yvonne, take care of yourself and your baby. I want to be there for the birth.’

Perfect.

After asking how the children were, I returned the phone to

Danny. And if I didn't feel good enough about how I'd handled my role, I was absolutely astonished to see Oleg giving me an approving thumbs-up! What imbeciles, I thought. Here I had passed incontrovertible proof not to believe a word that we were saying, and the big baboon thought I was helping him! Some Mob boss. Robert now began to show his impatience. He wanted to wrap it up. 'The money,' he mouthed to Danny, 'when is the money coming?' Danny posed the question, and Ian told him he would have the money on Wednesday. He would call on Wednesday, same time, to confirm. He'd send a telex to the Chekhova Street office tonight to that effect.

'One thing, though,' Ian added. 'I don't know where I'll be Wednesday night. I may be at the office. Call my answering service and leave a number where I can call you back.'

Danny wrote down the number for the answering service. 'Okay, got it,' he said. Then he hung up.

Robert looked quite satisfied. The money was getting closer. He could almost taste it.

'Charasho,' he said, lifting the phone off the stool and sitting down with it on his lap—'Good.'

I checked my watch. The call had taken twenty-five minutes. It was long and, I hoped with all my being, fruitful.

WAYNE, NEW JERSEY

Ingrisano was satisfied as well. In the course of those twenty-five minutes, any doubt that may have been left as to whether the Weinstocks were in mortal danger had been erased. With Ian having gotten a commitment from Danny to call the service with a number to call Wednesday, there would be no replay of the communications snafu that nearly snuffed out tonight's call. He told Ian how impressed he was by his calm but probing manner. 'Usually,' he said, 'people fall apart.'

Everything seemed to go perfectly—that is, until the other FBI men told Ingrisano that, even at twenty-five minutes, they hadn't gotten a traceable location for the Moscow end of the call. Such were the realities of trying to trace a call from tens of thousands of miles away and in a near-Dark Age place like Russia, a black hole for American intelligence agencies, by any measure.

When the Raymans heard this, Wendy broke into tears. However, this failure wasn't as significant as it seemed. In truth, even if the trace had been complete, the FBI was still not authorised to do

anything with it. Specifically, they could not release any such information to the Russians and could not even release it to the American Embassy in Moscow—the very reason why Ingrisano had instructed Ian to arrange the next call for Wednesday instead of the next day. That too carried some risk, as every hour was critical to the Weinstocks' survival. But the extra day might be worth the wait if the bureaucrats got their act together.

For now, all Ingrisano could do was sit on whatever else had been gleaned from the call. Even so, when and if authorisation did come, they would have to start from scratch with the tracing on Wednesday night. Left unsaid, but on everyone's mind in the house, was that it could be too late by then.

What the Raymans could not have known that night was that their prearranged information shuttle with Dimitry Afanasiev in Philadelphia was far more effective than the FBI phone-tappers. Given the number Danny had called from, Dimitry funneled it to the MVD switchboard via his open line to the MVD.

Within minutes, the number was run through the Ministry's data banks. Less than an hour later, at around 3am, it was matched to an address in downtown Moscow—right down to an apartment number on the ground floor. An officer spoke on a walkie-talkie to Colonel Rushailo. He and his men were in four cars cruising the area around the SovAustralTeknicka office on Chekhova Street.

It would take them only around twenty minutes at top speed to get to the address. They began to move.

Robert and Oleg wasted little time getting out of the apartment. Oleg killed the light, and we were hurried out to the car, its lights glaring through a mist of freezing snow in the dark night. The three cars rumbled their engines, breaking the deathly quiet of the neighborhood. We were taken to a nearby wooded park wedged between apartment-studded blocks.

This sent chills down my spine, as any wooded area was a logical dumping ground had the gang wanted to dispose of us. The reason for this stop became clear when the lights of the cars shone on a white object, which, as we got closer, turned out to be a white Mercedes-Benz nearly buried in a foot-high snow bank. It had obviously not

been driven for days.

That's when I really felt a chill. Peering through the icy window of the car, I recognised this particular Mercedes-Benz. It belonged to Grigory Miasnikov.

With a key, one of Oleg's men opened the door and after a few tries started up the motor. At that point, my face must have been as white as the Mercedes. If the gang had Grigory's car key, I couldn't help but believe Miasnikov must be dead. Was his body perhaps even in the trunk of his own car? As much as I had come to detest Miasnikov, just thinking that he might have suffered such a horrible fate, combined with the fumes from the cars, made me feel seriously nauseated.

Bloodthirsty savages, I kept thinking as the three-car convoy headed out of Moscow and back to the dacha. The fear I was now feeling was deeper and more intense than ever. I didn't know if I could live much longer with it.

MOSCOW, 3:30am

When Rushailo's rescue force approached the target address, they cut their lights. Parking down the block to evade the attention of any lookouts, they alit from their cars. Clad in black, military-style jackets, black pants, and black skullcaps, they were bare outlines against the night. Checking for any lights on in the building, Rushailo saw none. He directed his men to seal off the entrance to the three-storey building. With automatic weapons in their hands, they led five cops to the apartment, stealthily quiet as cats on the prowl.

At the door to the apartment, each unlatched the safety catch on his gun. Rushailo began to count down with his gloved fingers. One … two … three.

At three, two of them kicked at the door with their steel-tipped boots.

The door collapsed. They stormed in, guns pointing back and forth and side to side in the dark, shouting in Russian for anyone who might be hiding to show himself or be shot on sight. Trained to see in pitch-black conditions, they moved further inside, checking the bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen.

Rushailo flicked a cigarette lighter. The flame made the shadows of the policemen and their guns flicker on the walls.

He looked around again. Nothing. Not a damn thing but for cigarette butts all over the linoleum floor and a single stool in the

middle of the room, a phone perched on it.

He let fly an expletive. ‘Ten minutes,’ he muttered. ‘Ten goddamn minutes, and we would have had them.’

It was a failure he vowed would not happen again. But would he get another chance? Or was one blown chance one too many?

16

DAY NINE:
TUESDAY, JANUARY 14th
THE DACHA, MOSCOW AND PHILADELPHIA

It was yet another twenty-four hours of biding time and introspecting about our situation. As with most days, little mundane vignettes of seeming irrelevance tied the hours together. When I awoke that morning, I went into the bathroom only to find plastic washtubs piled on top of the closed toilet lid and a handwritten sign that read: 'Nyet robota,' meaning 'It doesn't work.' The water pipes had frozen again. Danny and I would have to repeat our command performance for the amusement of the dogs in the backyard. At least that allowed us to get out of the house and feel the bracing cold going through our lungs, something that was always welcome.

As usual, though, there always had to be an ominous sign, some reminder of why we were there and how helpless we were. For one, the babushka's noose always seemed to be staring us in the face, swinging malevolently from its door arch.

Another happened that day while Danny and I were sitting in the kitchen looking out the window. Hearing grunting noises and the sound of something being moved, I saw five of the men pushing down the snow-covered driveway the big, cumbersome Zil automobile that I had been thrown into outside Sheremetyevo Airport. Apparently, its motor had died, and soon it would be towed away. Watching that dreadful KGB car disappear into the distance, I cursed it and the memory of it that I knew would forever be in my mind. Hell would be its destination. Unfortunately, there were other Zils, Tipors, and whatever ready to take us away. To where? Certainly, we wouldn't be entombed at the dacha for much longer. We had been here too long already from the gang's point of view. It seemed obvious that we were only supposed to be stashed at the place for the short-term, a couple of days, only until the money was sent. That the ordeal had stretched to a week and a half could not have sat well with Oleg, and less so with his demented mother, who had become ever more agitated that these two strangers were traipsing through her house and eating her family's food. While the babushka had kept away from me, avoiding any more incidents such as the window-washing brouhaha, her face

had hardened into a fixed scowl, particularly when she saw me.

Oleg's concern was that, despite his control of the neighbourhood and the local police, keeping us in one place for so long was a risk; word could get out and seep into the corridors of law enforcement agencies beyond his control. If he had his druthers, I'm sure he would have much preferred not to feed us—except to the wolves.

Knowing something had to give, Wednesday would likely be when it did; the optimism I had felt and tried to keep intact was now ebbing. Although I'd felt Danny and I had done all we could in our phone conversations with Ian and Wendy, that part of the drama was completely unfocused, a fantasia, a faint hope of some kind of daring rescue I couldn't even fathom. All we had of substance was that the Raymans knew we needed help, and fast. Even if they were working with someone in law enforcement in America, how could that apply to where we were? It was all too unrealistic, a scenario from a James Bond story.

All that day, I kept hearing in my head one thing Danny had said to Ian the day before—'ten'—when Ian asked how many people were with us. Someone, I surmised, would find that extremely important to know, but who?

At the same time, it was also quite starkly apparent that being rescued was now our only option for survival. I couldn't imagine that Ian was actually going to send the money. He didn't have that kind of money and nowhere to turn to get it. In any case, it probably occurred to him, as it did to us, that the kidnappers wouldn't let us go even if they were paid. We could identify them and the house. The irony was, the delivery of the money would in effect be a death sentence for us.

I wanted Danny to bolster my outlook and my nerve. He had done so well literally under the gun in his phone interludes with Ian. He was so heroic, and for Danny, it must have been like living out a private fantasy. He loved to read Robert Ludlum and John Le Carre suspense novels, and prided himself on staying cool like the characters in The Bourne Identity and The Spy Who Came in from the Cold. However, in our moments of lonely isolation, the façade cracked. Often, I had to bolster his spirits. He would say over and over, 'We're dead; they're going to kill us.' I would reassure him all the time. 'No, we're going to live to see the children again,' I'd say. And I meant it. But now, I was withering.

For the first time, I think, I began to make peace with the inevitability of facing death.

Colonel Rushailo had no intention of waiting for the dilatory FBI to get its lumbering act together. Pending its authorisation from the bureaucrats to share information with his department, Rushailo, still simmering about his near-miss early Tuesday morning, called a top-level meeting at the MVD that afternoon.

Wanting no slip-ups next time—provided there was a next time—he broadened the domain of the case. This decision was based on the exact bit of information imparted by Danny Weinstock and relayed by Dimitry Afanasiev: that there were ten men in the room with them during the call. That could mean there were many more involved in the plot; certainly, it was not a one- or two-man operation, and not the sole province of Grigory Miasnikov. It might not exclusively be the Mob, either; the spectre of terrorists was raised for the first time.

Thus, a paramilitary unit was called for—the equivalent of an American SWAT team—to completely seal off several targeted raid locations at once and to be able to move in at the drop of a dime with overwhelming force if need be. As well, additional detachments of the Ministry of Interior police would support Rushailo's own elite squad.

Finally, extraordinary surveillance measures were taken. Rushailo chose an operational task force to be equipped with hidden cuff microphones and earphones. They would hit the streets in unmarked and beaten-up gray cars, making them indistinguishable from most other cars on Moscow's streets. In choosing surveillance sites, Rushailo and his department went to their charts on which undercover cops kept tabs on the movements and activities of the city's known gangs and their bosses. Members of one band in particular hadn't been seen at their normal haunts over the last few days; there was some suspicious activity in the pattern of their movements. This set off an alarm bell in Rushailo's head. He was given a list of the hangouts, seven in all.

He put out the order to the surveillance team: 'Move out to all of these places and don't come back until you have something.' For good measure, he sent one car to 25 Chekhova Street, to keep an eye out for Miasnikov.

Rushailo had another thought. While he hadn't received word that the FBI would share information with him, he sent by messenger a request to the US Embassy to be permitted to be on the embassy's premises for the Weinstocks' next phone colloquy with Ian Rayman.

The canny Rushailo was ahead of the embassy. When they received the request, no one there, or in Washington for that matter, had talked about using the embassy as a command centre using simultaneous transmissions of the phone calls—which in turn would

put the embassy's own phone-tracing mechanism into effect.

Again, the embassy staff was perplexed, but late that afternoon, half a world away in the FBI's main headquarters in Washington DC, the new request reached the bureau. As the specific details of the Wednesday phone call corresponded with that of Gerry Ingrisano's filed report from the day before, a light bulb lit up: The Russians were well aware of events in the case. They were also aware of Dimitry Afanasiev—and though they knew only that he had contacts within the Russian intelligence bureaucracy, as he had told Ingrisano, they wondered if in fact the Raymans were perhaps furnishing the Russian lawyer with key details.

Some FBI agents now worried that if the case were cracked by the Russian police with the aid of a Russian citizen in America—after being brought to the FBI's attention without any resulting action—the bureau would take a public-relations hit; the story would be that it punted while two lives were at stake. Moreover, since it was clear the Russians were filching information anyway, it obviated the original argument about giving them access to FBI information channels.

Late Tuesday night, Washington signed off on the two-day-old request to share information with and provide assistance to the embassy. The State Department would allow Russian police to monitor the calls, which, it was decided, would now be simultaneously heard by embassy personnel.

The last step was to have the heretofore-recalcitrant Australian government rubber-stamp the FBI and the Russians to work to free two of its citizens. This was no mere formality, since the mission could just as easily lead to the Weinstocks' deaths as their freedom. The former would raise hackles in Australia. The politicians in Canberra knew they couldn't condone ransom demands made by gangsters or terrorists. The only option was to let the Americans and Russians roll the dice.

Early the next morning in Newark, Gerry Ingrisano's office received notification that the US Embassy would be given access to all files pertaining to the case and would cooperate in any way necessary to bring the case to a successful conclusion. Finally, Ingrisano thought, finally a point of contact (Rushailo) and a means of communication transfer (the US Embassy).

The fax lines between Newark and the embassy began to burn hot. In Moscow, the embassy's assistant regional security officer, James Pelphrey, was the third-ranking officer in the embassy chain of command. Before him was Ambassador Robert Strauss and the minister counsellor for management, Joe Hullings. Pelphrey was put in charge of the embassy's operations for the case.

There wasn't much time for Pelphrey to get everything in order

before the Wednesday-night call. He had to set up the unprecedented logistics of teaming up with the Russians without letting them see the inner workings of the embassy's information-gathering apparatus.

Pelphrey had the same gnawing ambivalence as everyone else in the embassy. Before going to Moscow several years prior, he had been the chief bodyguard of the American ambassador in Khartoum, in the civil-war-ravaged African nation of the Sudan. His instincts were geared to keep at a distance anyone his gut told him was a threat. Now, he'd have to rub shoulders with people who were making his gut growl in Moscow.

17

DAY TEN:
WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 15th
THE DACHA, MOSCOW, AND WASHINGTON DC

'WHATEVER ACTION DEEMED APPROPRIATE'

Mid-morning Wednesday, Jim Pelphrey's adjutant called Colonel Rushailo and asked him to return to the embassy for an early afternoon meeting to finalise all details for that night. When he arrived with Major Bryzgalov, Pelphrey was waiting with the first secretary of the Australian Embassy's Consular Office, Bruce Scott. After politely shaking hands, the four men sat in a conference room, whereupon Pelphrey read aloud from the heretofore-classified FBI files of the case.

For the two Russians, it was a redundant recitation of information they already knew. They fidgeted in their seats, keeping secret their pipeline with Dimitry Afanasiev, which had circumvented the FBI and possibly rendered it irrelevant.

'Excuse me, but we are wasting time,' Rushailo interrupted through an embassy translator. 'What we need to know is that we can monitor tonight's phone call.'

Surprised, and not a little offended, Pelphrey, thinking that these Russians could use some lessons in manners, especially when in a foreign embassy, dropped the file on the table. If they didn't want to know what was in it, then he'd be damned if he was going to tell them. Instead, he cut right to the plan on which the embassy staff had settled for the handling of the call.

They would use the highest-priority line, the classified network called the International Voice Gateway, or IVG—the State Department's PBX, or tie line, which until 2001 connected Washington DC government offices with overseas embassies. There were three such IVGs in the embassy: one for general use and one each for Ambassador Strauss and Minister Counsellor Joe Hullings. So as not to tie up the general IVG, Pelphrey asked Hullings to use his and received the green light.

However, there was no way Pelphrey was about to let the Russians camp out inside the embassy as the highly secret phone-tracing procedures whirred on. Rather, he would transfer the IVG out to a phone in the cramped guardhouse by the front gate. That way, Rushailo's men could listen in while staring at American soldiers with guns on their hip—a lasting impression everyone in the embassy wasn't averse to leaving. Logistically, this made sense; all the Russians needed to do was walk a few steps inside the gate and back out if they wanted to make a quick exit to join the rescue effort.

Rushailo was pleased. His men would be there with a translator all night if necessary.

Though he still had a gnawing feeling in his gut, he was admittedly piqued about the deal, and a bit nervous. Undoubtedly, he figured, it would be a night to remember.

By mid-morning in Newark, Gerry Ingrisano was apprised of the linkup arrangements with the embassy. He then composed another fax to FBI headquarters in Washington. In part, it read:

> [The MVD's Department of Organised Crime] unit is prepared to do the following on 1/15/92:
>
> 1. Monitor and identify the location of any telephone calls originating in Russia to telephone numbers to Dr Israel Rayman or his wife, Wendy Rayman.
>
> 2. [Colonel Rushailo] will have his representation present … at the American Embassy to assist in the dissemination of information, which will be furnished by FBI, Newark.
>
> 3. [The unit] will be prepared to identify any callback telephone numbers and take whatever action deemed appropriate to effect the safe release of Daniel Weinstock and his wife, Yvonne.

The water was back on Wednesday, which meant that for the entire morning and afternoon, the women in the dacha were washing the dirty clothes that had backed up over the last three days. Natasha, Oleg and Rae's nanny, bore the brunt of it. Having been given this backbreaking work, the teenaged girl washed by hand and wrung dry

all the children's clothes in the upstairs bathroom and then pinned them up on lines outside in the backyard to dry in the freezing cold. She must have gone up and down the stairs fifteen times.

Finally, at 8pm she was done, nearly passing out in exhaustion. We weren't the only slaves. These people just seemed to enjoy having other, less 'royal' Russians do their work for them.

As for Danny and I, we were rather rumpled and dirty ourselves, and we waited impatiently for Natasha to leave the bathroom for good so that we could have a bath, or at least the sponge-down routine that passed for a bath in that bizarre purple bathroom. We hadn't bathed for three days so it felt good to clean off, though we shared some gallows humor as we sponged each other down. If we were going to die, better to die clean than dirty. Live hard, die young, and leave a good-looking corpse, we joked.

The fact that we could tell jokes like this, at a time like this, only proved that we were surely going out of our minds. Fear had turned to dementia. Maybe we preferred it that way.

However, when the night began to lengthen, drawing closer to the call to Ian, the cold slap of reality hit us, reopening the spigot of fear and sparking tension to clog the air. All the signs were there: Tonight was going to be the end of the line, one way or another.

That theme was only corroborated when at around 9pm Danny, itching to get going to make the call, went downstairs looking for Oleg. Danny was standing in the kitchen when Boris came in and, apparently on the order of Oleg, said, 'Boomaga,' the Russian word for 'paper,' which we had heard often at the airport when customs asked us for our identification documents. Danny thought: What the hell is he talking about? Again Boris said, 'Boomaga.' All Danny could think to do was go back upstairs with Boris and take out the notes he had made with the telephone numbers for Ian Rayman.

'Nyet,' Boris told him. 'Boomaga.' He gestured toward Danny's briefcase, which from all the searches of our belongings the gang knew contained a clear plastic bag with stationery bearing the Video Technology letterhead and company seal.

Danny took the plastic bag out, and Boris motioned for Danny to put it in his pocket and take it with him when he would leave to go make the call.

After Boris then stepped out of the room, we wondered whether this boomaga thing was perhaps a sign of desperation by the gang. A logical deduction was that Oleg and Robert may have concluded that should the plot be blown without any money being delivered to the gang, a letter would need to be written on that Video Technology stationery explaining what went wrong—and that it would have been our fault rather than theirs.

This, of course, begged the question of just who was the 'Mr Big' behind this plot. It was beginning to be clear now that this was someone over the heads of Robert, Oleg, Miasnikov and everyone else. Sifting through the black-hearted cast of characters we had come across over the past few years, we could think of only one person who could be that villainous: Mikhail Rud of the Vostok joint venture, the root of this whole fertiliser mess and our corrective detour in Moscow. Could Robert and Oleg feel so threatened by the execrable Rud that they needed to think of how to cover their sorry behinds if their plans went awry?

It seemed to be a very plausible scenario. And one that, if true, actually led Danny to believe it would be to our advantage, at least in the short run.

As he said, 'If they need us to write letters, we'll have to be alive to do it.'

At around 9:30, the front door opened, and we heard the thudding sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. Then the cloth in our archway parted to reveal the figures of Robert and Kuzin. Remarkably, given the stakes for all concerned—and irrationally, considering the likelihood that times were getting desperate—they seemed carefree, even giddy. They walked over to where Danny and I were sitting on a couch in the corner of the bedroom, wide smiles on their patrician Russian faces. They then took turns grabbing Danny's hand and shaking it in an exaggerated fashion—a courtesy not shown me, as a member of the lowly opposite sex.

Clearly, they were banking everything on Danny closing the final details of the money transfer with Ian that night and hoped that putting on a showy exhibition of 'friendship' with Danny would make him work harder to achieve this ultimate result. Watching their insincere show of glad-handing, I was tempted to laugh in their faces. It amused me that these seeming ex-KGB hotshots, who were so coldly calculating in their interrogation techniques, were in reality no less imbecilic than Grigory Miasnikov, who also had believed we were meal tickets in his fantasies of becoming wealthy and powerful. Where was he now? Six feet under?

Their rank stupidity was perilous for us. What would happen when they at last realised there would be no money for them? They would hardly be in a mood to give us any benefit of the doubt. They'd have to realise we'd been misleading them all along.

The thought buckled my knees in fear, especially when Danny

was told to don his overcoat because it was time to go. He kissed me on the cheek, then, circled by Robert, Kuzin, Oleg, and five gangsters, he was marched out of the dacha.

Because I had served my purpose during the last call—to prove to Ian I was alive and well—I was left behind. When I heard the door slam shut, it once more dawned on me that I might never see him again.

I was alone, terribly alone, lost in the cuckoo's nest, at the mercy of the babushka and her tribe of demented women relatives—and, most chillingly, a lone male member of the gang whom I did not know and had not seen before, whose job it was to watch over me.

I felt in a warp, absolutely lost in space and time, being separated from Danny. If there was a rescue operation afoot, how could we both be saved if we were in different locations? Perhaps Oleg and his cohorts had this very same thought.

In any case, I now not only faced having to worry myself senseless about Danny but also about being assaulted again, by the greasy guard whose eyeballs never left me from the time the rest of the men walked out the door. I kept thinking that the insidious Snake might have bragged to the others about his 'conquest.' If so, this one may have considered this night to be his turn.

It all had become so unbearable.

As midnight came and the eleventh day of the nightmare began, I was about to burst open in anxiety and fear. I couldn't help but think that even if the end result was death, it would bring relief. At least the torture would be over.

18

DAY ELEVEN:
THURSDAY, JANUARY 16th
MOSCOW AND THE DACHA

LYING IN THE WEEDS

As Thursday began in Russia, it was 4pm in the eastern United States. Ian Rayman had already come home from the office, stomach churning, unable to concentrate on anything but the impending phone call to Moscow.

The FBI trinity of Gerry Ingrisano, Joe McShane, and Tom Cottone were on their way from Newark to Wayne, call-tracing equipment in tow.

Dimitry Afanasiev, who'd been on the phone all day with his MVD contacts, was holed up in his Philadelphia apartment, preparing to keep a conference line open to the Raymans' private phone and the MVD switchboard.

James Pelphrey was in the guardhouse of the US Embassy in Moscow, Joe Hullings' IVG freed up and ready to be conferenced into Ian Rayman's line. He wondered when Colonel Rushailo's men would get there. Somewhere on the streets of Moscow, Rushailo was riding around with his elite unit, radio handset and walkie-talkie crackling with the sound of his men reporting where they were and what they were seeing.

As things were developing, they were seeing a lot. Scouting the right pinpointed locations under their surveillance, they had identified several members of the 'gypsy' gang that had displayed some peculiar movements for the last few days and had begun following some of their cars. Some were tracked heading outside the city limits to a dacha in Noginsk.

'Follow them,' was Rushailo's order, with the proviso that they should hold their positions. 'Don't move in right away,' he advised. 'Make sure you have cause.'

Meanwhile, Rushailo roamed the business districts, buzzing by 25 Chekhova Street regularly, as well as the apartment where he'd come up just short two nights before.

He was getting close. He could smell it. So close, in fact, that he barely thought about his hard-won right to horn in on the call from America that night and to wait it out at the US Embassy. Things were getting too hot on the street. Who needed to waste time twiddling thumbs in a guardhouse while they could be making the bust out there.

Besides, it may have occurred to him, the Americans had seemed too superior in their attitude in relegating his men to that cramped guardhouse. They could wait in there, by themselves. Then see how smug they'd be. If the Americans wanted to play head games, two could play. On two continents, thousands of miles apart, the trap was set, the bait eager to be taken. For Rushailo, in particular, whatever his motivations and private agenda, the night was inviting. The viper was lying in the weeds, itching to move in for the kill.

Danny Weinstock, not by coincidence, would be taken on a wild ride that early morning. Almost as soon as the Fiat Tipor into which he was trundled hit the street outside the dacha's iron gate, hidden eyes were watching it. What's more, as much as Rushailo's men tried to keep at a distance, Oleg, at the wheel—with Boris in the back beside Danny, and Sascha the Snake in the front passenger seat—may have sensed that the hunters were out there in the dark. As churlish as he was, Oleg had antennae that piqued when he was being followed. His sixth sense about the ghosts in the night may have led him to take the wheel instead of Boris, his usual driver. Oleg wanted to keep his eyes glued to the road, ahead and behind.

His route to Moscow was a series of zigzags, keeping Robert and Kuzin and the others in the two Volgas behind him guessing as to where he was headed, and struggling to keep up with the point car on the slick roads.

As Danny would find out, Oleg's well-founded paranoia would have another effect. It would mean the focus would shift from his impending phone talk with Ian Rayman to something far more frightening: taking him on a sudden—and likely oneway—journey a long, long way from Moscow.

For a while, it almost seemed as though Danny was an afterthought, as the gang's leaders stopped at another of Moscow's thimble-sized apartments, leaving Danny sitting outside in the car while they conferred about what to do, given the fact that their cover had been blown. Waiting for an hour in the frigid, subzero temperatures, urinating in the snow while making monosyllabic small

talk with Sascha the Snake, Danny had no inkling that his night of living in dark shadows was just beginning.

The night was about to become more confusing and more edgy when he was rushed inside the rundown billiard hall chosen as the site of an impromptu meeting. Squinting through a musky cloud of cigarette smoke rising from all corners of the back office where the gang sat, Danny must have thought he had seen an apparition when he recognised the last member of the group walk through the door.

The man was sallow, bespectacled, grim. Could it be? Was it really Grigory Miasnikov? Had he risen from the grave?

Danny blinked to make sure it was really him. Damn, it was. Had Miasnikov been lying low in order to throw the authorities off his scent? Was he called back now because he could provide some cover as a 'respectable businessman'? Did that mean the plot was falling apart?

Whatever the explanation, Danny's anger about Grigory resurfaced. He wanted to rip him to shreds. Trying to think rationally about what Miasnikov's return meant, he wondered if his and Yvonne's theory about Miasnikov and Oleg—that they were like oil and water, polar opposites who clashed on every level—would now come to the fore. He would look for signs of a fissure that might split the gang's unity and leave him a way out.

Grigory took up a position around the table as Oleg took over the meeting. Up until now, Oleg had been somewhat subservient to Robert and Kuzin, as if bowing to KGB preeminence. Perhaps having been tipped off by the cops in his back pocket that the MVD was closing in on the band, he reclaimed his turf. No longer was he taking a back seat to the KGB smooth-talkers who'd been too patient and civil for his tastes. They'd done it the KGB's way for too long. Now, they'd do it Oleg's way.

Speaking feverishly, with Robert translating, he set the tone of the evening with his pleint that the money hadn't arrived and, 'I don't believe Dr Rayman has the money.'

Danny swallowed hard. The gladhanding by Robert and Kuzin, which had led him to believe he could buy more time when he would speak with Ian again, had turned into a closed fist.

Digging for a comeback that would mollify Oleg, Danny said, 'You have not told Dr Rayman exactly where to send the money. Please give me the account details so I can inform him when we speak tonight.'

Danny knew he wasn't being truthful on this point, having given Ian an account number at the Vnesh Bank. Oleg was having none of it.

Danny kept plugging.

'You've received the last telex, correct? But you haven't shown it

to me, so I don't know where Dr Rayman is in the process. Let me make the call so that he can call us back.'

'Dr Rayman does not have the money.'

'That's right, he does not. But he'll get it, if I can call …'

'Nyet. No more calls.'

'If you want the money, you must let me make the call. Dr Rayman needs to know we are safe. You've told me not to say we've been kidnapped or beaten, or in any danger. I haven't. But I need to keep in contact.'

'Nyet. No more calls.'

Danny looked imploringly at Robert and Grigory.

'I beg you, Robert, Grigory. We've come this far, we're so close, we can't give up now.'

Robert and Grigory, who themselves seemed uncomfortable with Oleg's unilateral edicts, took him aside to a far corner of the room. After five minutes of arm-flailing discussion, Robert asked Danny, 'You have the paper?' He meant the stationery with Video Technology letterhead.

Danny pulled the plastic bag from his coat pocket.

'We've decided,' Robert continued. 'No more phone calls. But you will write a fax to the Far East Trading Company explaining what you have done to collect the money.'

Danny, fully convinced his life was hanging by a slender thread, hoped that perhaps this business of the fax might at least buy him a few minutes—or, dare he be optimistic, another night, if the gang really intended to send the fax to Rud. Good enough for now.

He was given a pen and began to compose a mea culpa intended to assuage Mikhail Rud and absolve the gangsters of any responsibility for the money not arriving—a tall order indeed. Not knowing exactly what to write, he recounted the phone calls to Ian and his contention that all was on track and one more call would get it done.

After he had scribbled a few sentences, Oleg cut him off with the words that would forever make him quake.

'Tomorrow, we will take you to Vladivostok.'

Danny, his head down, staring at the paper, could not chase the words from his ears. The sound of that one word made him wince. Vladivostok. It was more than merely the location of Rud's joint venture. Symbolically, it was the end of the world.

The place where the KGB took people, and from where they never returned. The Gulag.

While Robert and Oleg may simply have wanted to take him there to plead for time personally with Rud, Danny had every reason to believe there would be no return ticket.

Pretending not to react as he kept writing, his fingers nearly went

numb as he contemplated riding a train for seven days, disappearing into the Crimean wilderness and never seeing Yvonne and the kids again.

His mind grabbed at every straw that might prevent it.

'If you really want the money,' he tried again, 'it's better to keep me here in Moscow.'

Oleg was still unmoved.

'Keep writing,' was all he would say.

Suddenly, there was a din outside the room. Someone poked a head in and called for Robert and Oleg to come out. A short while later, they rushed back in, seemingly disconcerted, their henchmen grabbing up papers and cigarette packs. One took the sheet of paper from under Danny's pen and stuffed it into an attaché case. The chair on which Danny sat was all but pulled from underneath him as he was lifted up and whisked out the door by three of the men. Outside the billiard hall, men veritably leaped into cars, which took off in a flash.

There was a great swirl of movement, obviously precipitated by something that threatened the gang. Had a lookout spotted people he knew to be government cops cruising the street? Had a snitch at the MVD gotten word to them that squad cars were on the way there?

Whatever it was, Danny was back in the Tipor and on the move again. Led by Oleg's erratic but controlled driving, the three-car convoy careened around corners and crawled along back streets. In the back seat, Danny could barely recognise anything he saw out the window until, after a bumpy twenty minutes, Oleg came to a stop near a railway station.

The magnificent, stately metal archways towering above the tracks at once identified the depot as the historic Kazan station in northwest Moscow, some three miles from the Kremlin.

Danny could feel the blood draining from his veins. Was he going to be put on a train for Vladivostok right now? Was this the beginning of his long descent into oblivion?

That may well have been the intended plan. However, with the gang needing to keep running, there was no time to wait until morning for the next train going east. And so the plan was rewritten. Almost as soon as they had stopped, they were off again, the only change being that Miasnikov was now in the car, replacing the Snake.

Clearly, Rushailo's dogs were nipping at the wheels of the cars, their task made easier by the fact that there were virtually no other vehicles on the road at this time of the night. The convoy seemed to be on its way back to Noginsk, but Oleg made several detours. He was able to shake the pursuers for only so long. Twice he was going so fast that police cars for routine speeding flagged him down, but, both times, as on the night of the first call, when the low-level cops

approached the car, they were 'persuaded' to do nothing.

Oleg then wound his way to yet another apartment, which couldn't have been more than a ten-minute drive from the dacha. Here, Boris got out, taking Danny and Miasnikov with him. Everyone else remained in the cars as they sped off.

Seeing Marusia inside, Danny knew that it was Boris's flat, and a nice one at that. There was flattering wallpaper, expensive furniture in the living room, pricey crockery adorning shelves in the kitchen, and a cockatiel in a cage. Boris had surely done well for himself, Danny thought, though God only knows what he'd had to do to earn these spoils of the Mob game.

After his scare at the Kazan station, Danny had a comfortable feeling here. He was invited to sit at the kitchen table, whereupon Marusia brought in some tea—tea again! Was that all these people drink? Then their teenage daughter, Laura, joined them at the table, and Marusia began to fry chicken on the stovetop. Danny just couldn't figure out these Russians and their off-the-wall customs. It was 2am, and they were having dinner!

After the meal, Danny again appealed to Grigory to let him keep trying to call Ian Rayman. In fact, he said, it was just about the time that the call had been scheduled to take place.

Miasnikov, however, was just as adamant as Oleg had been.

'No telephone calls,' he admonished, 'but you can write the fax.' He added that he himself would send it the next morning.

'I can also write to Dr Rayman and to my attorney in Melbourne,' Danny suggested. 'First you will finish writing the fax to Vladivostok.' With that, Grigory produced the fax Danny had begun writing, which had been given to Miasnikov when he had exited the car.

Dutifully, Danny completed the letter to Mikhail Rud, and then wrote two more, to Ian and Joe Krycer.

Having done what had been asked of him, he felt he was entitled to make a request—to call the dacha to let Yvonne know he was okay. Since his address book with Ian and Krycer's fax numbers was at the dacha, he said, he could also have Yvonne read the numbers to him.

He was told there was trouble with the phone in the apartment and that maybe he could try in the morning. It was a lame excuse, to be sure, but it at least provided him the answer to what would happen next. Nothing would. He would have to get through another night in the confines of another strange Russian family.

Stranger yet was what transpired after Boris put out the lights in the flat. Grigory, having apparently pulled rank, sent Boris and Marusia to sleep in the guest room. He deigned that he would use the main bedroom to sleep on this night—and to be able to guard Danny, the two men would bunk together.

Danny didn't know what to make of this. It wasn't bad enough that Miasnikov had betrayed him and Yvonne and gotten them into this nightmare. Now he would have to share the same bed with him! Yvonne and Danny had heard some of the gangsters spend their idle time at the dacha gossiping about Miasnikov, whom all despised as much as the babushka. They couldn't understand much in the men's native Russian, but the word pederast came up, apparently in reference to the aging Grigory being married to an eighteen-year-old girl. But what if it went beyond that?

Danny did not want to find out. While Grigory had no compunction stripping off his clothes down to his underwear, neatly folding and stacking them on a chair, and getting under the sheets, Danny kept his clothes on. He lay on top of the blanket and pressed himself against the wall next to the bed, sequestering himself as far away from Miasnikov as he could. Almost comically, he peered out of the corner of his eye at the lump under the blanket in the other side of the bed.

Nothing was said between the two. Before long, Danny heard Miasnikov snoring. How, he thought, can this man sleep so peacefully with all that's going on? He must have no conscience at all.

Danny could not even close his eyes. He was exhausted from the wild rides he'd been taken on, yet he was also wired from fear and anxiety. Compulsively, he kept looking at his watch every few minutes. He couldn't imagine what the next scene would be in this demented Lewis Carroll story.

The first thing that indicated to me that something different, something unexplained was happening came when I heard the front gate outside close with its normal clanging sound. The front door opened, and I could hear Oleg's gravelly voice yammering in the kitchen with the babushka. I also heard Sascha and some of the other men plodding up and down the stairs.

It was well after 3am. Where was Danny?

What had transpired with the phone call to Ian? Why hadn't he come back with the others? Was he even alive or had something gone horribly wrong and, in panic, had the gang rid themselves of the 'evidence'—his body?

Naturally, I was practically banging off the walls of the bedroom, my mind playing tricks on me, imagining Danny lying in some ditch and me about to swing from the old hag's noose. As much as I desperately hoped the commotion downstairs meant there may have been some sort of police action underway, at the same time on some level of my consciousness that was the last thing I wanted, as that would make me a liability to the gang.

The fears, the hallucinations, the sense and nonsense, had become absolutely unbearable. When Rae suddenly clomped in, wildly waving for me to pick up my things and go downstairs, I was relieved to be able to get out of that room before the walls closed in on me.

Even in the middle of the total confusion, I was able to think in a clear-headed fashion. While sweeping my clothes into my suitcase, I saw Danny's address book and other business notes, folders, and documents on a table. Somehow, one part of my brain focused on a possible rescue—and that, if we were saved, we would need these items for our business to continue.

That was about as irrational as it gets, but they were ours; they represented our hard work. They could help prove why we'd been kidnapped. So I gathered them up and shoveled them into a white plastic bag I was going to use for my dirty clothes, then jammed it into my suitcase, leaving behind the damp clothes that were drying on the radiator under the window. Only then did I lug the suitcase out of the room.

It was the same kind of clear thinking that led me to expect the worst. About halfway down the stairs, I realised that I was being moved to a different location, not out of choice but necessity. Perhaps Oleg had decided there was no point in keeping Danny and me together any longer. If something had gone wrong and he wanted to do away with us, it could be that he wanted to scatter our bodies thousands of miles apart, tougher to be found.

Whatever would happen, wherever the wind would take me from here, my mind could not countenance that people were coming to rescue me. That was not reality. Dying was reality.

It was that reality I so desperately wanted to alter when Rae sent me back upstairs to get our other suitcase. I pulled the Valium from my makeup case and transferred them into my pants pocket.

The reality I believed I couldn't alter was when that herd of thundering men in their military-style parkas rumbled through the door and the leader of the pack trained the barrel of his machine gun at my midsection.

Again, all I could do was wait for my last breath of life, stone cold and still as death on those stairs.

But he didn't shoot me.

I didn't die.

And when I didn't, my voice returned.

'Please, don't shoot me,' I was able to say, in little more than a trembling whisper.

He moved his gun away from me. Silently, he walked into the

area behind the kitchen. Suddenly, incredulously, I was standing all alone as all hell was breaking loose around me, as men with machine guns chased people through the house.

In that crack of time, with seemingly no one aware of me, I thought only of taking the Valium from my pocket so that when the man with the gun came back and did shoot me, I wouldn't know it.

Stepping from the staircase, I walked into a corner of the living room. Reaching into my pocket, I scooped up the six tablets and shoved them into my mouth—30 milligrams of Valium in one shot, quite a heavy load for a five-foot-four-inch, one-hundred-and-ten-pound woman to absorb at once.

I figured it wouldn't take long for me to be on the floor, unconscious. I hadn't eaten much of anything for ten days. My stomach was empty. Nothing would stem the powerful sedative from knocking me out. I began to feel a little wobbly. Yet I didn't faint. Adrenaline was rushing through my body; fear was fighting the drug.

Instead of blacking out, my eyes were sharp. All my senses were alive. What I felt most keenly was the sensation of cold. My whole body was shivering, not from the temperature in the house but from pure fear.

I realised then that I had forgotten my overcoat upstairs. When one of the gunmen, a tall and wiry type, came into the living room, I rubbed my shoulders and said, 'Jacketa, poszalesta,' and nodded my head in the direction of the second floor.

He understood. Taking me by the arm, he walked me up to the bedroom where my purple coat was draped over a chair. I wrapped it around me and pulled the hood over my head, then nearly collapsed onto the corner of the bed. I think I may have passed out at that point. Then a fattish man in distinctly non-military dress—instead, he was wearing a multicolored Ivy League-style sweater—came into the room looking for me.

'Yvonna, dah?' he said.

'Dah.' I asked, 'Who are you?'

He didn't answer, but the tall one with the gun reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out a small red card with a yellow star on it. He flashed it so fast before my face that I barely saw it, much less read it, before he put it away again. If the card and whatever it said were supposed to put my mind at ease, it had the opposite effect. I was no less frightened. All I knew was that men with assault weapons were everywhere. In my agitated, confused state of mind, these were merely new and different kidnappers.

This again struck me as I saw Oleg, still wearing his coat, his hands cuffed behind his back, being led past my room and into his bedroom down the hall. Was this a turf war between gangs? Was the

new gang part of a corrupt coterie of military or militia forces? Had Oleg been sold out by one of his gang? Had another Mob boss heard about the money and moved in?

If any of that were so, it wouldn't change my situation. Moreover, this new turn of events hardly guaranteed that Oleg was out of the picture. Looking at Rae and the other women's reaction to the incursion, it seemed to me they were not the slightest bit concerned. It was as if they'd been through this sort of thing before, be it a police raid or a show of force by a rival mob, and had no worries that Oleg would not be able to talk or buy his way out of trouble as usual.

His daughter, Nella, in fact, seemed to be taking in the whole scene with bemused detachment. Standing on the landing atop the stairway, she may as well have been in the balcony of a movie theatre, munching on popcorn.

The man in the sweater pointed to the several pieces of luggage that had been left behind, which were Danny's. He asked in broken English if they were mine. I nodded. He then called in two more men and they carried all the bags as he ushered me by my very bruised arm downstairs. My two suitcases had been placed by the front door next to my boots, which had sat there, unworn, since the first day here when Oleg had decreed I couldn't wear them. I was told to put them on, and the soft leather comforted my by-now blistered feet.

We were obviously going somewhere. While getting out of that horrific house was a blessing, I moved haltingly, knowing neither my destination nor my fate. Before leaving, I shot a quick glance backward. The gunmen, having surprised and overpowered the few gangsters that had been in the house, had taken them all into different rooms, while the women stood around meekly cradling their young children—not merely out of a maternal bond, I would learn, but in the knowledge that in Russia women cannot be arrested with children in their arms.

I could hear the babushka's screeches pealing from upstairs, no doubt trying to get Oleg out of trouble. She was somebody else's problem now, not mine. If she were in fact the Ma Barker of her son's gang, then she would get hers, too.

I turned my head to the darkness outside. There must have been five cars on the driveway, mostly old gray Fiats, inside the forced-open gate. On the veranda was a sight I thought I'd never see: Robert, his hands also cuffed behind him, flanked by a pair of gunmen. Seeing me exit the dacha, he followed me with his eyes, his face burning red in anger as though I was responsible for the predicament he was in.

For a brief moment, I relished the role reversal. Now, it was the oh-so-cosmopolitan KGB man who was being held and humiliated. If I chose, I could have laughed at him for it.

But was I in a position to logically do so? Was I free?

No one told me I was. On the contrary, the grim looks on the faces of my 'liberators' only reinforced my fears. Put into the front passenger seat of one of the Fiats, I saw my luggage being roughly tossed into this and another Fiat. Within seconds, the two cars were out on the road barreling into the night. Next to me, the driver was talking nonstop into a two-way radio while in the back two men sat silently, in shadows, their guns pointed to the roof.

Although I was somewhat woozy and disoriented from the Valium, I was sentient enough to ask questions as he drove on. I kept repeating to no one in particular—not that it mattered since no one likely understood what I was saying—'Are you going to kill me?' Trying Russian, I asked, as I had inside the house, 'Gidye Moi Moozh?' Again, no answers. The only thing close to a response was when a hand reached out from the back and tapped me gently on the shoulder.

'Charasho,' someone said. It was meant to comfort me, and yet it gave me another chill. Oleg had, after all, used the same word when we had spoken to Ian, and it just reminded me that Oleg had time and time again warned Danny and me not to say a word to any possible authorities about the abduction. They'd only put us in jail for extortion, he said. It was in my mind that if these men were actually police, they might not necessarily be friendly to me.

Danny was out there somewhere. If I said anything about being kidnapped, and fingered who had taken us, would Danny pay the price for it?

I wished I didn't have to ponder such things. I just wanted to slip away into blackness.

Out the window, I saw the world moving by as if on a conveyor belt … railroad tracks … road signs … trucks going in the other direction … miles of empty space.

What happened next was almost as frightening as being kidnapped. After just ten minutes with snow and ice piling up on the Fiat, we rolled to a halt by a dense forest. The driver killed the engine, opened his door, and went back to the trunk. He had left the headlights on, creating an eerie corona around the car, and in the rear-view mirror I saw that he had removed a long, black, stick-like object. When I saw him carrying it as he walked back around the other side of the car, I emitted an involuntarily gasp. That stick looked to me to be uncomfortably similar to the makeshift wood, nail-studded stanchion that Oleg had beaten me with so unmercifully.

He walked slowly, ploddingly, toward my door.

Fear and a new rush of adrenaline bolted me upright in my seat. My stomach felt queasy. My heart raced. My eyes widened. It could be

only one thing about to happen. He was going to take me out, shoot me, and dump my body in this forest.

I heard myself begin to whimper. The door would open any second. And then … nothing. He kept walking, past my door to the front of the car where he took the object and glided it over the windshield. It was nothing but an ice scraper.

My heart had nearly burst through my chest. Now, I began to breathe easier. I sat back in my seat. I started to feel woozy from the Valium again. If only I could have just gone to sleep.

No such luck. Before long, we were in Moscow, tooling along the main avenues instead of the usual back streets where Oleg and Robert had taken us. We passed the Bolshoi Theatre and squat, fortress-like government buildings near Red Square and the Kremlin. We pulled up to the huge arches and steel gate of an enormous building a city block long, black and sinister. A jail? The old KGB headquarters? There were no signs or engravings on the building. The car wound to a side gate that opened to let it through. The men helped me out. We went into the building, with two of the men toting my luggage.

The place was deserted, and our footsteps on the hard, tiled floor echoed through the cavernous hallways. The four of us got into an old elevator, which inched upward, maddeningly slowly. It must have taken a full five minutes to reach the fourth floor, where we walked out into the semi-darkness of a maze of grungy corridors. We trod past numerous darkened offices until we came to one that was lighted.

The door opened and inside, at a table, four men in civilian clothes sat, saying not a word as we came in. Scattered on the table were a number of passport photos. Even at a slight glance, two of the images in the pictures were immediately recognizable. They were Oleg and Robert. Should I tell them I know those two men? Should I plead for help? Or should I just say nothing and play dumb? If only someone would tell me something, anything.

At last, someone did. He was a tall, blond, and handsome man wearing a sporty beige leather jacket, green shirt, and khaki brown pants—looking more like a salesman than a cop. Entering from a side office, he approached me, looking as stern as the others. He began to speak.

‘My name is Andrei Zharov,’ he began, in perfect English. ‘You are in the Department of Organised Crime of the Ministry of Interior Police. I am a captain in this department. You have been rescued, and the abductors are under arrest. We will do whatever we can to bring them to justice, but it is not easy to convict people in Russia. The system is very corrupt. We will need your help to put them away.’

There was something about his words, or rather the tone of them, the cadence, the faint British accent, the crisp diction. It hit me with a

thump of familiarity. The only Russians I had heard speak in this manner were Grigory Miasnikov and Robert—both of whom I strongly suspected were bred by the KGB. This Andrei Zharov, could he too have been a KGB refugee who had infiltrated the Ministry of Police? There was a difference between him and the other two. He seemed genuinely sympathetic, not a soulless creep who had been programmed to say the right things. But did this merely prove how smart and canny he was? Could it be he was even more devious—and more dangerous?

I couldn't help but to keep my emotions closed off to him. Conditioned as I was by Oleg's browbeating indoctrination about what the police would do to me, all I could think to say was, 'Are you going to put me in jail?'

A thin smile broke through his stony face.

'In jail? For what?'

I didn't answer. Instead, I asked where my husband was.

'We haven't found him yet,' he said.

As I began to cry, dabbing at my eyes with a tissue I took from my purse, he added, 'But we will. I promise you, Mrs Weinstock, we will find him.'

Left unsaid was whether that would be dead or alive. Also unsaid was anything about what had happened at the dacha—or, for that matter, anything that would have corroborated that this was in fact the Ministry of Interior. In my semi-dazed state of mind, my imagination and my fears were still running wild. I wasn't ready by any means to believe what I was being told, or that I was in any way safe.

These people could have been anybody. They could have said anything to get me to reveal information they were after. Maybe they too were after the money. Indeed, when I asked if I could call the Australian Embassy, Andrei told me it was the middle of the night and that it wouldn't be a good idea to wake someone up there. I thought that that was one of the most preposterous things I'd ever heard. His next request gave me a real jolt.

'Could you please come with me to my apartment and write your story on paper?' he said.

How would that be a part of police work? I said to myself. 'Why do I have to go to your apartment?' I said defensively. He assured me I would be safe and then took me by the arm and out the door. To my great relief, he led me not out of the building but through a long breezeway to an adjoining wing of the building. Evidently, he had meant to say 'office' but it came out 'apartment.' Once inside this office, he sat me at a desk and gave me a pencil and paper.

I sat as best I could on my very bruised rear end and began

writing, though in my condition, it was mostly an incoherent jumble. I still felt nervous that it was just the two of us in this small space in an otherwise unoccupied building. While he offered no explanation of what was going on to rescue Danny, he did bring me tea and told me that when the cafeteria opened at 6:30am he would bring me breakfast.

Every once in a while, the phone would ring, the loud ring giving me start. Each time, I hoped it would be word about Danny, but it wasn't, and I'd break down and cry again. As the Valium began to wear off, my normal tendency to babble when nervous surfaced, and I nattered on and on to Andrei about all sorts of things completely unrelated to why I was there. Amazingly, he listened to every word. He must be okay, I reasoned, to listen to all this rubbish.

I could now feel myself beginning to relax a bit, to trust him. Maybe, I really was rescued.

Maybe it was over. Maybe I was safe.

At about 6:45, another cop came in and handed me a slip of paper with the phone number for the first secretary at the Australian Embassy in Moscow, Bruce Scott. When I called, it felt good to hear an Australian accent—a real one, I could tell, not some Russian gangster faking it. He asked me if I felt safe where I was. I hesitated. I think he could read my mind.

'I can assure you, Mrs Weinstock, that you are really at the Ministry of Interior. I will be over to see you at about 8:30, after I drop my kids off at their school.'

'Do you know anything about the whereabouts of my husband?' I asked.

He began by saying, 'I'm sorry'—which made my heart jump into my throat—'but I don't. But I've been told things are happening.'

After the call, Andrei left me in the company of a creepy, non-English-speaking cop, who stared at me, saying not a word. With nothing to do—ironically, much like my idle hours at the dacha—I sat myself next to a window that now overlooked Moscow and stared out as the dark night melted into the bright light of morning. The day was breathing life into the city. Traffic bustled, and people hurried in and out of buildings.

Somewhere out there, possibly within the distance I could see, maybe Danny was being rescued. Would he walk through the door any minute? Or would someone come in to tell me something else, something terrible?

Maybe I was free—maybe. But I still felt trapped. Waiting was still the hardest part, and it had not become any easier.

Ian and Wendy Rayman were getting worried. It had been two hours since the 6pm zero hour, when Ian was to make contact with Danny again, yet the phone had not rung once. Sitting at the kitchen table with them, earpieces in place, Gerry Ingrisano, Joe McShane, and Tom Cottone were ready to monitor and hopefully trace the call. The main phone line was split into a second line that hooked up to the IVG connection in the guardhouse at the US Embassy in Moscow. Periodically, Ian called the numbers Danny had left previously, to 25 Chekhova Street and the apartment tracked down by Colonel Rushailo. No dice. No messages from Danny came to Ian's answering service or to the clinic. Hopes of a big breakthrough turned to a numb ennui and a growing dread that something terrible had befallen the Weinstocks.

Dimitry Afanasiev, in his Philadelphia apartment, was itching to pass along some information to the MVD switchboard, but Wendy had the same status report every half-hour or so: 'Nothing yet.'

Jim Pelphrey, alone in the embassy guardhouse, waited for Rushailo's men to show up at the gate and was becoming a little steamed. The Russians had made him jump through rings and had received unprecedented access to American intelligence—and now they took their sweet time? Then again, there was no call for them to listen to. Maybe it wasn't coincidental that they weren't here, Pelphrey ruminated. They must be getting information elsewhere.

He was half right. Rushailo, of course, had been getting information from another source. However, on this night, Dimitry Afanasiev was in the dark, too. The simple fact was that Rushailo had all the information he needed. The gypsy gang was under surveillance; his men had identified the gang's boss and an ex-KGB agent known to have been working in the underworld.

At 3am, Pelphrey received the word he was expecting: The SWAT unit had followed and then pounced on its prey at the dacha in Noginsk. The raid that freed Yvonne netted five mobsters, including the two biggest fish, Oleg and Robert. However, Rushailo cursed the bad luck that again bedeviled him when Danny was not at the house.

Only rescuing both Weinstocks would suffice; there could be no victory and no glory for Rushailo if one lived and one died. 'Keep the heat on,' he ordered all his other units in the field. 'Bring Mrs Weinstock to the Ministry of Interior,' he directed. 'Make her feel comfortable, but get whatever information about the band of kidnappers you can.'

By now, Rushailo knew full well that, with the gang on the run, there would be no phone call between Danny Weinstock and the

American doctor, and thus no time to waste at the embassy. He had to find whoever was holding Danny. It could only be Miasnikov. He put the word out. Find him!

At 4:45pm in Moscow, 8:45pm in Wayne, the MVD telexed the FBI office in Newark that Yvonne had been rescued. At the same time, someone at the Ministry of Interior placed a call to Dimitry Afanasiev and tipped him off to the successful raid. He let out a sigh of relief, but he too was not satisfied; he kept the phone line open to the MVD switchboard. Ian and Wendy, meanwhile, found out about Yvonne when Ingrisano received notification from his office. The Raymans hugged each other. Wendy laughed and cried at the same time. The night had not been a waste, after all.

Ingrisano, though, wasn't ready to do any celebrating. 'We're only halfway home,' he said.

In Moscow, Wayne, and Philadelphia, they all hunkered back down, thinking the same thing.

Where was Danny?

'YOU ARE SAFE NOW'

The lights had only been off for about an hour when, just after 4am, the phone in Boris's flat—in working order, after all—rang. Boris stumbled into the living room and picked up. He could barely believe what he heard and called out for Grigory to wake up and come out of the bedroom he was sharing with Danny. A heavy-lidded Miasnikov took the phone, whereupon he was told Yvonne had been taken from the dacha by the police and that Oleg, Robert, and three others were under arrest. Kuzin had vanished, his whereabouts unknown.

Miasnikov was shaken, but he tried not to panic. It was he who had to make the decisions about what to do with Danny. He had two options: He could hang tough and try to somehow keep the ransom demand alive, or he could turn away from the plot and try to save his own hide. He chose the latter.

It was the smart move; Grigory was nothing if not smart. He had been told that the cops had cars looking for him all over the city. They were surely on to him, proving the wisdom of Oleg and Robert in bringing him back into their web as a visible and putative 'business partner' of the Weinstocks—who could now claim he had been victimised along with them by their unscrupulous business enemies.

To make this ruse work, of course, would require the cooperation and corroboration of Yvonne and Danny, who would have to be persuaded not to rat him out.

Danny could judge by the commotion in the living room that

something was up, something that might bode well—or very bad—for him. An agitated Boris walked into the bedroom and angrily ordered him to come into the kitchen with him and Grigory. There, Boris manically paced the floor and began shouting menacingly at Danny. He looked close to snapping, and with all the sharp knives on the counter, Danny wondered if Boris would grab one and come at him. Grigory, however, calmed him down and took him aside for a quiet discussion.

There was no doubt that Miasnikov was in charge and that he could make the gruff, toad-like Mob foot soldier do whatever he wanted. The contrast between the two was a microcosm of the divergent methods that made the alliance of Miasnikov and the provincial gangsters a rocky one, and it recalled the Weinstocks' great, if faint, hope that it could ultimately rupture the plot.

Danny didn't know if it was playing out that way; too much was still unclear about what was happening. After more discussion between Miasnikov and Boris, the latter had a stunning pronouncement.

'Something has gone wrong,' he said, with Grigory translating the words he had all but put in Boris's mouth.

Then, the kicker: 'You are about to be released.'

Danny damn near fell over. Had he heard right? He was about to be set free? Just like that? Did that mean Yvonne was also free? What about the fax to Mikhail Rud? What about the money? What about Vladivostok?

Without knowing the full story behind the astonishing edict, he knew it could not have come from Oleg or Robert, much less Boris—not with the Russian Mob's code of 'honour,' known as the Vorovsky Zukon—about seeing a job through, one way or another. No, it could only have come from an interloper, and not incidentally someone who could hold sway over Rud. That was Miasnikov. He did have snake-charmer skills, didn't he?

Indeed, this is exactly what Miasnikov had up his sleeve. He would explain to Rud that, once Yvonne had been rescued, the plot had to be aborted. They would have to cut their losses from the fertiliser group—for now, anyway.

In truth, Miasnikov had other, more personal considerations. With his unbridled vanity and pretensions of upper-crust 'legitimacy,' he couldn't bear the thought of being captured and jailed like a common criminal. His entire reputation as a businessman was at stake; the only way to salvage it was to withdraw as gracefully as he could from this disastrous, ill-conceived 'venture.'

To achieve this, he had one last threat to make—identical to the one he had made to poor Richard Markson on the first day of the

misadventure.

'If anything happens to any of us,' he made clear to Danny in the kitchen—though he surely meant 'me' and not 'us'—'you will be killed. Do not think that you or your family are safe in Australia, or anywhere else in the world.'

Danny took the threat seriously. If it was the price for his freedom and his family's safety, it was a small one.

'Yes, yes,' he said. He would not divulge that he and Yvonne had been kidnapped or beaten. He and Yvonne would hide the bruises on their bodies until they healed.

His tour of Wonderland, though, was not yet over. Miasnikov, knowing how close the police were, had to turn his role in the plot on its head. He had to be with Danny when he was rescued, in the guise of a friend, an ally, even a protector. Two hours later, at around 6am, with Grigory having sold Boris on the viability of his plan, the three men put on their overcoats and left the apartment. A bit self-consciously, they walked out onto the busy street on a bitterly cold but brilliant, sunny morning. Grigory told Danny to continue walking with him and Boris down the block.

For about ten minutes, the troika—in the face of the massive police dragnet—casually and anonymously strode through crowds of people headed to work. When no cops or squad cars emerged, Grigory ordered Boris to flag down a passing car to stop—a common sight in Moscow, where accommodating drivers make extra money by ferrying pedestrians around town. An old blue Volga stopped, Boris gave the driver some money, and Grigory and Danny got in as Boris went his separate way.

The destination was central Moscow: 25 Chekhova Street, which Grigory assumed was the highest-visibility target of all for the police. Just before they arrived there, Miasnikov changed his mind and directed the driver to the Hotel Leningrad, where he and his young wife lived in a suite. During the ride, the two passengers—who were still officially business partners—spoke civilly, with Grigory trying hard to make shoptalk with business matters such as the joint ventures as well as a potential deal to build a resort on the Black Sea about which he and Danny had discussed in the past.

What gall! Danny thought. This man had used his position in our business to pull off his vicious betrayal. Because of him, Yvonne and I were almost killed. And now here he was, pretending that nothing had happened? Does he really think we'll just forget what he did?

The car pulled up outside the Leningrad, an elegant, old-world hotel that Miasnikov obviously considered the kind of lodging suited to his cultivated tastes. Never one to keep a low profile—and maybe especially so now, wanting to be noticed with his esteemed Australian

business partner—he politely asked Danny to come to his room to meet his wife, upon which he went through the revolving doors with a flourish and flounced through the lobby to the elevator.

He and Danny rode the lift to the fifth floor then ambled down the opulent hallway to a corner suite. Grigory turned the key in the door. Stopping Danny a few steps inside, he said, 'Wait here while I see my wife. She doesn't know where I've been for the last two days. She'll be very worried.'

Danny smirked at Grigory's self-absorbed arrogance. She'll be worried! The poor thing. What about Yvonne and me? We have no idea where the hell the other is!

Miasnikov walked down a long corridor. Minutes later, he reappeared with his girl-bride, whom he called Elena. Wearing stretch black pants and a T-shirt, she looked like she could have been his daughter, a fresh-faced and gawky girl. Grigory had confided in the car that he'd only married her because her parents were going to give them a snazzy apartment that they owned. In Danny's mind, Miasnikov may not have been a pederast, but he definitely was a cad.

Speaking in passable English, Elena offered Danny—what else?—tea. But he was sick of tea. In fact, he was sick of this runaround. Why did he have to follow Grigory around? If he was free, he wanted out—now.

'I need to call the Australian Embassy,' he told Miasnikov.

'I will call them myself,' Grigory said, 'but it's too early. There'll be no answer.'

In the meantime, he told Danny to take a seat in the living room, and in short order, Elena brought out cups of tea and plates with slices of chocolate cake. Danny wasn't much interested in this odd version of a breakfast. He wanted to know why Grigory had told him he was about to be released, yet wasn't.

'Why did you bring me here?' he asked.

'Just sit. Eat. You'll see.'

He looked supremely unworried, leading Danny to wonder if this was all a big con, a game—a trap. Just as Grigory had said, it took fifteen minutes before the answer indeed became evident.

First, there was the sound of heavy footsteps in the hallway outside. Then came a banging on the door and shouts of, 'Open! Open!'

Grigory rose and walked to the door. He turned the knob, not bothering to ask who was out there.

The door swung open, and men in leather jackets, automatic weapons drawn, rushed in.

Elena screamed and began to run down the corridor, but was ordered to freeze. She stood affixed, still as a statue.

Grigory, who made no attempt to move or resist, was immediately tackled and dropped to the floor by two men, his hands cuffed under him.

Danny, just like Yvonne back at the dacha when men like these crashed in, waited to hear the rat-a-tat of machine gun fire that would blast him to pieces.

Without knowing why, just on instinct, he sank to the floor in a corner of the room and hid his eyes, afraid to look up. Instead of gunfire, he heard a man's voice, in English, saying, 'What is your name?'

'Daniel Weinstock,' he replied.

The man aimed his rifle away.

'You are safe now,' he said. 'Your wife is safe as well. She is in our custody.'

Now Danny raised his eyes. Grigory was standing, pressed against the opposite wall, his hands cuffed behind his back. Two cops had their guns on him. He was told not to say a word. Apparently knowing who he was, they had not asked him to identify himself and evidently had no reason to make conversation with him at all.

If Miasnikov had planned to talk his way out of trouble, being smothered and muzzled like this wrecked the plan.

Danny, with Grigory's threats in mind, had no intention of incriminating him.

Still, he was glad he wouldn't have to back up anything Grigory would have to say that would be designed to absolve himself of guilt. So he said nothing.

Helped to his feet by one of the cops, Danny threw his arms around the man's shoulders and held on tightly, as if terrified to let go. He tried to fight tears but couldn't, and his entire body began to heave as he sobbed uncontrollably, inconsolably. The cop let him hold onto him and weep.

It was 8:45am, Friday, January 17, 1992.

The eleven days of hell were over.

19

DAY ELEVEN: THURSDAY, JANUARY 16th AFTERNOON AND EVENING, MOSCOW

At around 10am, Captain Andrei Zharov walked into his office in the annex of the Ministry of Interior looking pleased.

'Mrs Weinstock,' he said, 'Your husband has been rescued at a hotel in Moscow. He's safe. He's being brought here.'

The words nearly lifted me up from the chair and through the ceiling. I let out a yelp of joy and felt like jumping into his arms, but then, out of my control, I began to cry and buried my face in my hands. I can't remember if I ever felt as much relief or if my emotions had ever turned as suddenly as this before.

Only a few hours before, I had stood petrified on the staircase of that cursed dacha, ready to die, waiting to feel bullets going through me. The concept of hope didn't exist anymore. And now, as if only by the will of God, the nightmare was over in the most farfetched way possible, with both Danny and me safe and sound and the kidnappers captured. No one will ever convince me there are no such things as miracles.

About half an hour later, Andrei was back to tell me Danny had arrived in the building.

'Can I see him?' I asked.

Oddly, he shook his head no.

'Why? Why can't I see him?'

He looked very uncomfortable. Obviously, he didn't want to upset or alarm me, but he was perturbed about something.

'He's not hurt, is he?' I went on. 'Is he all right?'

'Yes, he is fine. We are questioning him. We will be finished as soon as possible.'

Questioning? That's why I couldn't see him? It didn't make sense. Couldn't they just question us together? Wouldn't it be easier that way?

Then it hit me: There must be a reason why they couldn't have us corroborate the details of the kidnapping. The only reason I could think of was that Danny wasn't telling them what I had written in my statement. Someone had gotten to him. I was sure it was creating a

sticky wicket.

'UNTHINKABLE'

Indeed, the post-arrest time frame had its own tense moments. Yvonne and Danny and five of the conspirators—Grigory, Robert, Oleg, Kuzin and Orloff—were all in the building, telling their stories. However, Danny stunned the interrogators by maintaining he hadn't been abducted at all; rather, he said he had merely been away on a 'vacation' at a resort on the Black Sea the past eleven days. He had been visiting 'friends' in Moscow, including Grigory, when the cops had stormed into the Leningrad Hotel.

This obvious fable was causing massive problems that meant he would need to be kept separated from Yvonne, since their stories were diametrically opposed.

The inspectors knew Yvonne had told it right.

She had named names and explained the beatings and torture in pulsating detail, while Danny was evasive and fell back on the canard about the vacation.

The big problem wasn't getting Danny to break—the cops were confident that once he came to trust them and feel safe from harm, he would loosen up and spill the truth. It was that they had only seventy-two hours to get him to do it. Under the absurdities of Russian law, charges had to be filed within that time, or the suspects would be freed and never prosecuted. The prosecutor would need both Yvonne and Danny to jointly make the case; thus, a rift between them would be disastrous.

The snafu was so serious that Colonel Rushailo himself came to see Danny and explain how vital it was that his story match up with Yvonne's. But Danny didn't budge, and for hours, nothing changed. Day became night. Yvonne and Danny had yet to see each other. Time was still ticking, but on a different drama now.

For Yvonne, those hours of interminable stagnation were like living in suspended animation. Everything around her just stopped. Her world again became the cramped confines of a small room with a single window.

Bruce Scott of the Australian Embassy, who had told her he would be by to see her at 8:30am, had finally arrived at around noon. However, after Danny had been brought in, Bruce was permitted to only briefly see her, during which time Yvonne appealed to him to convince Zharov to let her see Danny. Not only did that not happen,

Scott was then prohibited from seeing either of the Weinstocks. Danny's intransigence was a serious roadblock, and until the two told the same story, Scott was told, they would be strictly segregated, with Danny undergoing the familiar ritual of a third-degree by people he didn't know or trust.

Rushailo, who thought the prosecution would move along with the same smooth clockwork as had the rescue mission, was disgusted by a complication which threatened to dim the spotlight in which he was prepared to bask. Pulling no punches, he bore in on Danny in his office.

'Mr Weinstock,' he said, through Andrei's translation, 'if these animals are walking free in seventy-two hours, who will they come after first, you or Yvonne?'

Ironically, while this restive drama played out at the Ministry of Interior, the story of the kidnap and rescue spread with major impact. Almost right after Danny had been found, word filtered from the MVD to Dimitry Afanasiev then onto Ian and Wendy Rayman and the FBI agents encamped at the house, then back to Jim Pelphrey.

All had been waiting hours for the phone call that never happened. When the clock struck midnight in Wayne, even though no one at the house wanted to say it, the giddiness about Yvonne's liberation drained along with his or her energy. An hour later, they were wearing their depression and fatigue like cloaks. Everyone wondered who would be the first to say out loud what he or she were thinking—that Danny must have been killed in retaliation for Yvonne's rescue. When word finally came at around 1:30am that Danny was also safe, the kitchen erupted in whoops and hollers and high-fives—though years later, Gerry Ingrisano recalls the moment a bit more coolly, in typical FBI-speak. 'It was,' he said, 'a good event.'

After the celebration, he, Joe McShane, and Tom Cottone packed up and drove to the Newark FBI office to file reports. Hours earlier, the Newark office had sent faxes to the bureau's Washington DC headquarters requesting confirmation of Yvonne's rescue. Even in those early cables, the Newark boys had already begun to gild the lily, touting the American government's lead role in the resolution of the crisis. One paragraph from that batch of faxes read:

The location of Yvonne Weinstock and the arrest of subject[s] was accomplished through the cooperation and exchange of information between the US State Department and [Russian] militia officials.

Nothing, of course, was said about the initial reluctance of the

bureau to get involved. Rather, given the happy ending, the same bureaucrats who had stalled were more than willing to take bows—despite the fact that in the end the FBI's 'official' involvement was of less value than the information passed along to Rushailo during the 'non-official' phase.

Once Danny's rescue was confirmed, the PR department at the Newark office was put to work drafting press releases about the successful mission. A release was sent to the media before the sun had even come up, lauding by name just about everyone—except, pending notification of their family, the Weinstocks, who seemed almost an afterthought in the overall story line. It began:

An Australian citizen and his wife, being held against their will in Russia, were freed yesterday, in a unique case involving American, Russian, and Australian law enforcement agencies. The unidentified Australian couple was reportedly not seriously harmed after eleven days in captivity, during which time their Russian captors were demanding a payment of more than $1.5 million dollars [sic] from the victim's relatives in New Jersey.

The release went on to relate the role of 'Dr Israel Rayman of Wayne, a brother-in-law of the Australian male victim' in the phone calls, which the FBI 'consensually monitored,' gleaning telephone numbers, street addresses and other information [that] was it passed on to Russian police authorities through the US Embassy in Moscow, leading to the suspects being identified and pinpointed. Then, more preening: 'This is another dividend derived as a result of the transformation which has occurred in what was the Soviet Union. Such close cooperation in a criminal investigation between these two agencies would have been heretofore unthinkable.'

It concluded:

[The FBI] complimented the Russian law enforcement officials and expressed gratitude to the US State Department in Moscow and to the Australian Federal Police for their critical assistance [and] also expressed his appreciation to the law firm of Wolf, Block, Schorr and Solis-Cohen, located in the Packard Building, 15th and Chestnut Streets in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. An associate of that firm, Dimitry O. Afanasiev, assisted in establishing lines of communication with Russian authorities.

Given the riveting, James Patterson-like plot line, the US government clearly sought to use the broad theme of unprecedented cooperation as a powerful political metaphor. By the next day, the media jumped on the theme. The New York Times was already preparing a front-page story for Saturday the 18th.

In Moscow, meanwhile, Jim Pelphrey appreciated the feel-good vibe of the story as it was being spun by his government. After he

terminated the connection with the FBI at 9am, he could finally leave the cramped guardhouse at the embassy and go to bed, pleased that the operation had been an epic success, although something about it stuck in his craw.

When Jim Pelphrey broke contact with the FBI, he'd been in that guardhouse for close to twelve hours, and in all that time, no one at the embassy heard from the Russians. He asked himself a few times, 'Aren't we doing all this just so the Russians can get the information they want?' If the FBI traced the call, didn't the Russians want to know? The Americans did all this for them, and then the next thing the Americans hear, is that some Russian lawyer in Philadelphia is passing the information they needed.

Jim was thrilled at how the whole thing came out. He thought it was great how all these barriers were broken to establish a method of communication with the Russian security services. But to be honest, he naturally thought he would be in the thick of the rescue, because the Russians had led him to believe that, but in the end, Jim did very little. He just had one long, all-night conversation with an FBI agent in New Jersey.

He was a young diplomat at the time, very idealistic. When it didn't happen the way he thought it would, his nose was put a little out of joint.

I don't know if Andrei wanted to tell me why Danny and I were being kept apart, but I kept pestering him so much about it that he eventually confirmed my suspicion that Danny was telling a different story from mine. But he still had to put up with me bugging him to let me see Danny, to persuade him not to protect the kidnappers.

'How can you keep me from my husband? How cold-hearted can you be?' I railed.

I was just so cranky and so tired. I was angry with everybody for treating me like a prisoner. Andrei, for example, told me I shouldn't even open the door to the office, because I might see the kidnappers being led back and forth, and they might intimidate me. That, of course, only made me want to do it. Maybe I would see Danny out there. During one of the periods when Andrei was out of the office and I was being watched by blank-faced cops, I got up to stretch my legs and slyly pried the door open a crack.

Amazingly, just as I peeked out, standing there, not five feet away, was Grigory Miasnikov! Before I could close the door, our eyes met, and he glared at me with the filthiest look imaginable. The

hatred simply cut through my entire body. When I closed the door, my hands were trembling.

I was more afraid of Grigory at that moment than I was at any other time, even when he stood by when Oleg and his henchmen were beating and stomping me. At that point, I knew I would never be able to testify against him at a trial. I was absolutely convinced that if I were ever in the same city or country, he would find a way to have me killed. That may not have been courageous, but such was the man's power. He was that evil. Brilliantly evil. I just hoped the Russian authorities would be able to put him away.

There was no chance of that as long as Danny kept clamming up about Grigory and the others. Fortunately, he had a change of heart. At around 9pm, some eleven hours after Danny had been brought in, Andrei returned. Looking almost guilty that he'd had to keep us apart, he waved excitedly.

'Come,' he said, 'you can see your husband now.'

My heels practically flew down those slick corridor floors, through the breezeway, back into the other Ministry building. Andrei, struggling to keep up with me, got to the original office I'd been in and flung open the door.

I was expecting that when Danny saw me he'd sweep me up in a bear hug. The man I saw sitting slumped and weary in a wooden chair was barely recognisable as my Danny. He was a defeated man, scared, shaking. It was as if, having implicated the gang, he believed he had signed death warrants for our families and us.

Wearing the gray cardigan sweater I'd knitted for him months ago, he looked up to see me. His face was gaunt and unshaven, his eyes distant. At first he seemed cold, not wanting or able to show any emotion.

Seeing him this way, I realised he must have been through the wringer the last twenty-four hours. Even during the worst days at the dacha, he never looked as physically dissipated and defensive. I could tell he was petrified, just as I'd been when I was brought into this brooding black mausoleum. I reached out for him, touching his arms. He seemed to back away, like he didn't want to be touched, and so I merely put my hands on his and gently squeezed them.

For both of us, I realised right then, getting back to normal feelings and emotions wouldn't be as simple as being rescued. We'd been in hell. Our minds and our souls had been damaged. The scars on our bodies would heal sooner than the inner psychological scars and the wall of numbness we'd erected. Neither of us would ever be the same.

I drew a chair and sat next to Danny, holding his hand, and we began to talk. It was small talk, about getting something to eat, about

where we would go and such, but it was a start.

Fortunately, Bruce Scott was allowed to see us. He was the first to put us at ease, as opposed to all the rat-faced Russian cops who seemed to resent us for some reason. Bruce and his secretary brought us food, and he told us he had arranged for us to stay for the next few days at an Australian Embassy safe apartment until we would go home, as scheduled, the following Tuesday.

Even now, though, we were not free to leave. The police work wasn't over. First, our bruises would have to be photographed. An austere policewoman who told me to strip off all my clothes took me into another room. She then snapped Polaroid pictures of every conceivable area of my body, which made me very uncomfortable. We then had to go over our written statements, together now, with Andrei under the watchful gaze of another man who stood a few feet away, his arms folded haughtily.

Every few minutes, as if to get approval, Andrei would say something to him in Russian. I wondered: Who is this big shot? He looked like he himself was a gangster who had stepped out of a B-movie. Around forty years old, dark-featured, his hairline receding, he wore a vivid red shirt and black tie under a black leather jacket—a pearl-handled revolver on his hip. After a while, he smiled and introduced himself as Colonel Vladimir Rushailo and congratulated us in broken English—although he seemed as if he really wanted us to congratulate him.

We didn't have any idea who he was, but we could tell this was a big moment for him.

He seemed extremely pleased with himself; he felt he deserved adulation. That's exactly what he was getting, as people in the Ministry came into the office to shake his hand.

Watching him preen, I grinned wanly. Yet another crazy Russian character, I thought.

It was now 10pm. The Ministry building had become empty again. All the paperwork was done. Grigory and the four other gangsters had apparently been taken to jail cells in the basement. Rushailo, having gotten his handshakes, had vanished. Andrei uttered the nicest-sounding words I believed I'd ever heard:

'You are free to leave.'

With Bruce Scott and Andrei leading us, we put on our coats and rode that ancient elevator down to the first floor and exited by the side gate where I had come in. There waited two cars, Scott's limousine and Andrei's police car. Danny and I got into the limo, and we drove off, while Andrei followed. Not five minutes away, we stopped at a modern residential building. We all went upstairs to the second floor, to a two-bedroom apartment much different than the

cave-like flats we'd seen around Moscow. It was large and well furnished.

I felt little comfort. Nothing, not even a fortress, would shield me from the fear I had that someone outside in the night was watching, waiting to take a shot. After all, only five of the gang had been apprehended. The police seemed to be content with that, but what about all the others who had aided in holding us? What about Boris? What about Sascha, the sewer rat who had raped me? They were all out there somewhere.

For about an hour, both of us nervously paced the floor, taking looks out the window, as Bruce and Andrei sat in the living room talking and leisurely sipping tea. Since I was wide-awake, I used this time to make a blizzard of phone calls. I called Australia and spoke to Susan, to my sisters, to my parents, and said a few words to the kids. All of them, of course, knew nothing of the kidnapping, and Bruce told me the FBI had forbid Ian Rayman from telling the family a word about it, believing that if the news leaked out, we would have surely been killed. I told them all about the ordeal only briefly and matter-of-factly, saying the most important thing was that we were now safe and that we would be home on Wednesday.

Then, at about midnight, a call came for Bruce Scott, who took it and told us the embassy had set up a conference call from America. Ian and Wendy were on the line, as was a lawyer in Philadelphia named Dimitry Afanasiev, whom we were told had been involved with the Raymans, the FBI, and the Russian police in a first-of-its-kind rescue mission approved at the highest levels of the American, Australian, and Russian governments.

PART THREE
THE AFTERMATH

20

MOSCOW AND MELBOURNE JANUARY–DECEMBER 1992

At 11am, after a few fitful hours of sleep, Bruce Scott and Ian Wing, the senior trade commissioner at the Australian Embassy in Moscow, came by the apartment to pick us up. First, they took us to the embassy, which was located in a grid of streets known as Embassy Row. So many countries had their diplomatic missions there. At nearly each embassy, a fascinating ritual was going on.

Russians waited in long lines to apply for passports to get out of the country now that they were officially permitted to do so. It seemed not to matter to which embassy they'd go; when a line became shorter, people from other lines would switch to that one.

One of the most desirable, and longest, happened to be at the Australian Embassy on Kropotkinskaya Street, no doubt because Russians saw so little sunshine, they had designs on Australia's January summer. Danny and I felt the same. We were literally aching to get out of this God-forsaken tundra and recover from the horrors that Russia would forever embody for us. Merely getting inside the embassy was a large jump up the cultural scale. Seeing Bruce put some food into a microwave oven, we sat there wide-eyed. That's how long it felt since we'd been away from civilisation. When we could drink Australian coffee instead of that tar-like Russian tea, it may as well have been champagne.

We made some more calls home, and then it was back to the Ministry of Interior for more corroborative interviews by the Russian cops. The Organised Crime Department wanted to build an airtight case against the five gangsters before the weekend began and needed to get every detail straight. Somehow, the cavernous black Ministry buildings weren't quite as forbidding on this morning, and the faces of the policemen not quite as morose—though, of course, this was probably my imagination. The faces of Grigory, Oleg, Robert, Kuzin, and Orloff—in the pictures from which I had to identify them—were no less frightening. God, how I hoped those monsters would be put away.

Slowly, it began to occur to me that, despite the scars that still burned on our bodies and the near-death experience we had faced,

there was no time for self-pity or even recuperation. We would have to turn our attention back to the business. We had all those deals on the table in Russia, notwithstanding the loss of Grigory Miasnikov as our conduit to the joint ventures.

The first thing that became obvious to us was that we should stay away—far away—from Mikhail Rud, who we believed had been in cahoots with Grigory and may well have hatched the entire plot, though it could just as easily have been the doing of Grigory or even Matthew Hurd. We never would know the definitive answer to that riddle. This posed a delicate situation, since we had agreed to make good on Rud's alleged—and bogus—'loss' from the ill-fated fertiliser deal; that was the main reason we had come to Moscow. While we considered that agreement null and void given the extortion and torture perpetrated upon us, and had told the police all we knew about Rud, there was no hard evidence that he was involved. Still, how could we possibly do business with the man now?

Our decision was that we wouldn't. If Rud was smart, we conjectured, he'd keep a low profile and duck suspicion rather than press on with the 'debt' nonsense and risk more investigation. Maybe that would be our unspoken but tacit quid pro quo: We'd all just keep our distance from each other. The bottom line was that we were so angry at Rud that we weren't about to pay him a red cent in any case, nor in any barter goods, which is essentially what we owed him, his demands for cash notwithstanding.

So now we dove right back into the pool with the other joint ventures. As awkward as it was to pick up matters with them, given Grigory's arrest and the uproar it surely caused at 25 Chekhova Street, our business was still quartered there, and we assumed that Grigory was the only bad seed, not the others. Indeed, the assistant director at SovAustralTechnicka, a very nice man named Alexander Ivanov, was supportive. He agreed to come into the office on Saturday and schedule meetings for us with the other JVs.

Some of them had heard about the kidnapping and were freaked out; they said they would call back to confirm the meetings, but never did, either out of fright or because they thought we were too 'hot' to want to deal with us right now, if ever. Others, we found out, had been told by Miasnikov during the previous week that we would be 'uncontactable,' which sounded an awful lot to me like another way of saying, 'Never to be seen alive again.'

Unlike in America or Australia where newspaper articles about our kidnap and rescue had already begun to appear on Saturday, few people in Moscow had actually heard the story, nor would they. The Russian newspapers were no longer state-controlled, but they were still loath to report anything about the crime epidemic in the country,

even if the police had won out. Except for a brief mention in Pravda, it went unreported. Those who did know heard mainly by word of mouth, and apparently the story became a kind of underground legend.

Thus, when we met with several of the JVs, the directors were more interested in having us recount the saga than talk business. It didn't help, I suppose, that wherever we went for these meetings—one venue, with acrid irony, was the Spunik Hotel, the very place where we had met the insidious Mr Rud—we were accompanied by three of Andrei Zharov's armed policemen.

At these get-togethers, I would try to be cool and businesslike, but often I would break into uncontrollable crying. Consequently, much of the business details were left hanging. All we could do was promise to contact them again, but an ominous complication was that the JVs needed us to revisit Moscow in the future. Though we left it open, I knew full well we would never be back. The very thought made me go stone cold with fear. Once you escape hell, you don't give the devil another chance.

Nothing, though, is ever easy in Russia, and even our scheduled departure became something of a hassle when a last-minute hitch developed. Because we had never checked in to a hotel, we did not have a chance to have our visas stamped with our local residential address included. Thus, there was no official confirmation that we'd legally been in Moscow at all. This could have caused a typical long-term delay until the paperwork was taken care of. Colonel Rushailo at the Ministry of Interior cut through the red tape. On Saturday, a letter went out from a Colonel A.A. Nazarenko from the Executive Committee of the Directorate of Internal Affairs to the City of Moscow authorities.

Because we had been 'unlawfully detained,' he wrote, 'I request that [the Weinstocks] be assisted with an exit visa from the country.' On Monday, we were officially cleared to go. Now it was nice to have friends in high places.

The following day, Tuesday, the 21st, we could finally flee Hades once and for all. Mid-morning, Bruce Scott and Andrei packed our luggage into Bruce's limousine, and, with Andrei following in his car, we drove to Sheremetyevo airport. Once there, Danny and I realised just how attached we'd become to having our own detail of high-level bodyguards the last few days, headed by a police captain. With our flight to Belgrade only minutes away, first Bruce Scott, then Andrei

had pressing business to tend to and bade us goodbye and good luck, leaving us alone for the first time since we'd been rescued.

We sat in the Yugoslav Airlines lounge, feeling like babes lost in the woods, with not a familiar face in sight. Our fears rose. Would an assassin, having gotten his chance, now jump from the crowd of travelers and finish the job on us? Right up until the moment we stepped onto the plane—and even after—we were gripped by the notion.

Somewhere over Yugoslavia, we finally relaxed a little. Just a little. Now our thoughts turned to home. The kids. The house. Our own bed. A crush of publicity. Unaware of when we'd be returning to Melbourne, reporters had begun to camp out on the street in front of our house in Brighton on Cole street. Susan told us she had to sidestep them—including some who thought she was me—when she took the kids to school. Requests for interviews were streaming in to the Video Technology office and our mailbox at home.

On Monday—two days after The New York Times broke the story worldwide—front-page stories about us had run in The Herald-Sun, The Australian, and The Age, and on the Australian TV news shows. Among those quoted, Alexander Ivanov certainly had the understatement of the year. 'In the old Soviet Union today,' he said, 'we have many racketeers and Mafia structures. [The Weinstocks] met some unfortunate people.'

To control the circus-like atmosphere of our return, we called the only newspaperman we knew, to act as our point man with the media in sorting out interview requests. Even doing this much was difficult, since we really weren't emotionally ready to talk about what had happened to us. Eventually we decided to do only one print interview when we got back—for a three-part series in The Herald-Sun, one of Australia's biggest newspapers—and two television interviews, for A Current Affair and for the Australian Broadcasting Company's Foreign Correspondent.

We had a lot of time during the day-and-a-half progression of homeward-bound flights to ponder a terribly uncertain future and to relive in our minds the terror of those eleven days. Most of those hours in the air I did little but sit slumped in my seat crying. On the first stopover, in Belgrade, a flight attendant who had overheard me talking about the horrors personally took Danny and me into the VIP lounge and maternally told me to lie on a couch and try to rest.

We would receive more special treatment when in the early afternoon of Wednesday, January 23rd, we landed at last in Melbourne. As soon as we were off the plane, half a dozen members of the Australian Federal Police met us at the gate. After we collected our luggage, they whisked us through customs, and then took us out a

back exit to avoid the media that had gathered at the airport. Three cars escorted us home to Brighton. We had to slow to a crawl because of the media people out front on the sidewalk before going up the driveway and into the house.

We had a wonderful homecoming. My parents, Billie and Wally were there, and the four of us fused in a circle of hugs and kisses. Later, Danny's parents would arrive, and Susan would bring the kids home from school. Ian and Wendy called to tell us they'd be in on February 4th and that Jonathan would finally return home in March. It was supposed to be a day of reverie, to eat, drink, and laugh long into the night, willfully and blissfully keeping both the recent past and the impending future out of our consciousness. But while the others had a good time, I could not manage to get into the spirit. I said goodnight early, went to my bedroom, fell into the bed I'd sorely missed, and sobbed quietly. That was the first clue that everything I would now do to try to restore normalcy in my life would produce cruel reminders that nothing would be normal for me again. My constant companion was the trauma of reliving the nightmare over and over again.

To do that for the public record, in the series of articles that appeared in The Herald-Sun, absolutely twisted me into a thousand knots. I'm sure that reading the grisly details of the story as laid out by the reporters had the same effect on many people. When the first installment ran on Saturday, January 25, the start of the Australia Day holiday weekend, accompanied by a huge headline reading: 'THEY WANTED TO HANG ME: TORTURE HELL IN MOSCOW,' our friends were shocked, perhaps most of all by the photographs that ran with the articles. In those, I was barely recognisable, looking sickly and emaciated, and there was a Russian police shot of Danny, half-nude, bruises all over his body. Hell, indeed.

If doing that interview wasn't difficult enough, we felt victimised again in some of the media coverage. When we appeared on A Current Affair, for example, we faced an inexplicably hostile reporter, who seemed adversarial, as if she didn't believe our story. As well, some of the other newspapers covered the story in ways that were less than sympathetic to us. One paper—widely regarded to be anti-Semitic—snidely put quotation marks around the word kidnapped in the headline, as if to infer we had made up the tale! People in the media don't know how hurtful something like that can be. They are especially cruel and heartless.

More concerning was the dire state of our business. The only positive note about it was that it would have been a lot worse had Mikhail Rud had his way. Incredibly, the man who had thought nothing of having us kidnapped didn't let old dogs lie after all. Only days after we'd left Russia, Rud, on March 19, sent a threatening fax to the Video Technology office. Without a word of commiseration about our travails in Moscow, he reiterated his claim to $1.6 million.

'This agreement was not fulfilled,' he wrote stuffily. 'I am asking you [by] April 20th [to] notify [me of] the time and place to meet your commitments, otherwise we will have to involve your government and international courts.'

In response to this crude and shameless bluster, we cabled Russia's ambassador to Australia, saying that we 'suggest strongly that Mr Rud and his organisation were the perpetrators of our kidnapping' and that the Australian Federal Police would step in, if necessary, to see justice done.

Rud, though, brazenly persisted. Making the long journey from Vladivostok to Moscow, this sleazy character talked his way into a meeting with Ian Wing at the Australian embassy to appeal for the Australian government to recover the money for him.

This was the height of chutzpah. Ian Wing was sickened hearing demands by the man he knew was neck-deep in the abduction plot. Rud was shown the door and informed he was no longer welcome at the embassy. They may have also not minced words in warning him to keep away from us, because we did not hear from him again.

Even with Rud off our backs, however, no one could get rid of our massive debts. We had lost Vostok as a trade partner, and other joint ventures had become scared off from doing business with us. Still others owed us money from past deals. One joint venture, for example, owed us $200,000. We might have been able to make them settle, but it would have cost us far more in legal fees.

Worse, our assets in the Vnesh Bank were frozen by the Russian government pending the resolution of the criminal case. At Ian Wing's urging, we considered filing suit against the Russian government under a new law being proposed in that country that would allow crime victims to seek compensation. We asked Dimitry Afanasiev to make some calls on our behalf, but after making inquiries, he told us the law would only apply to political prisoners of the old Soviet regime, so we dropped it.

Swimming in all that red ink, we could no longer afford the 8000-square-foot office on Claremont Street, South Yarra. Within six months of our return, we had let the staff go, closed the office, and folded Video Technology. For a time, we went back to our software-development company that had been dormant for two years, running

it now out of our home, but the debts we had incurred were overwhelming, crippling, and Danny soon after declared bankruptcy. I didn't, only because under Australian commercial law a company cannot operate with bankrupt directors. Nevertheless, the bill collectors now began coming after me.

Knowing that the bank would have taken our house, we decided we had no choice but to sell that glittering showplace we had always said we would kill to keep. In the end, we made almost nothing from the sale since we had very little equity because of the sky-high mortgage repayments. We then rented a far less opulent home.

We'd fallen a long way from the heady days of la dolce vita. And the hole would just keep getting deeper.

I was falling through a different hole, a personal one, in my own soul. The memories of what I had been through, which would erupt at any time, day or night, left me with not a moment's peace. While Danny, who could repress his inner emotions with little difficulty, seemed to be rebounding from the trauma, I was growing more mercurial, and I'm quite sure manic-depressive, though my downs were always more intense than my ups, which were at times nonexistent. A psychologist, named Dr Tim Watson-Monroe, called a few days after our return and offered his services free of charge. I consented to see him.

Tim was very good, very patient with me, but nothing could stop me from constantly crying for no apparent reason. Sometimes I would take little Melanie with me when I went for a session with Tim. Before I could summon up the strength to go into his office and talk again about the events that made me physically sick, I would plop down and sit on the stairs outside the office building, sobbing, with Melanie in my arms. Passersby would stop and ask me if I was all right. I was anything but.

I'm sure I was suffering from some form of post-traumatic stress disorder, which in turn led to a terrible sleep disorder. I simply could not release my fears enough to relax and close my eyes. Subconsciously, I may have been afraid I'd be transported back into the nightmare, and that I'd wake up in the dacha again. Tim prescribed sleeping pills and anti-depressants (Valium, of all things). Twelve years later, I still take the sleeping pills. Just as, twelve years later, my fears that someone is lurking around every corner are still with me.

Something did happen, however, that eased my mind just a bit. It was something very, very strange. We'd been back home about a week when the phone rang. On the other end was a man we had known from the community who was, like me, active in Jewish affairs, a very stable guy with no cause to want to do us harm or play with our

heads. In a serious tone of voice, he said he had something important to tell us and asked if Danny and I could meet him in a nearby park.

He didn't go any further, and normally such a mysterious request would have made me slam down the phone and go hide under the bed sheets. We had known of this man, and the park was a public place, adjacent to the synagogue where Avi, my first husband and I had married. When I told Danny about it, we both agreed that we would do it. We went over to the park, where the man was waiting. We all sat on a bench whereupon he got right to the point. He said he had just received a call from the head of the Russian Jewish Mafia in New York and that 'he wants you to know that you and your families' lives are safe here in Australia. He has passed the order.'

Danny and I looked at each other, not knowing what to make of this melodramatic, Godfather-like moment. If it was true, we were truly flattered.

'They're talking about us in the Russian New York Mafia!' I said in wonderment.

We thanked him and went home, more than a little stupefied. Was there even a Russian Jewish Mafia? If so, how could mobsters halfway around the globe protect us?

We didn't need to answer the questions. We just hoped they did, and could. Maybe, we thought, that was why Rud had gone away. Maybe we were being protected. Guardian angels or the Jewish Mafia, it didn't matter at all.

21

MELBOURNE AND THOUSAND OAKS CALIFORNIA, SEPTEMBER 1992–JULY 2004

The prosecution of the five gang members charged with our kidnapping became the sole province of the Russian criminal justice system when the American State and Justice Departments declined to ask for their extradition to the United States, 'In deference to the Russian prosecutors, 'the FBI put it in one of its press releases. However, this was just a diplomatic formality; in truth, even if the Americans wanted to adjudicate the crime—on the borderline grounds that the extortion attempt was made in the United States—there was no way the Russians were going to give up a choice opportunity to grandstand. And yet, for all the career mileage some—primarily Colonel Rushailo—would get out of the case, the nature of Russian 'justice' made the prosecution very problematic.

In February 1993, Boris Yeltsin, in a startling admission, said, 'The world has come to consider Russia as a powerful bastion of the mobs. We are surpassing countries like Italy that have traditionally been in the front lines [or organised crime]. There are criminal structures literally corroding our country from top to bottom.' Logically, the justice system was the core of this rotten apple. It was infested and infiltrated by ex-KGB loose wheels and underworld mobs, tainting scores of judges and prosecutors who had free reign to coddle the crooks and smother their prosecution.

Aiding them was the fact that, in the books of statutory law, crimes such as kidnapping and extortion were not even official crimes in 1992, for a simple reason: These were two of the normal tools in the KGB arsenal of intimidation, and its agents would be immune to prosecution if their methods were ever brought to light. It would take years to codify such crimes with appropriate sentences. Moreover, while Chechen rebels had exported the war to Moscow, with car bombs and assassinations, there also were no laws that specifically covered terrorist activities or war crimes—yet more tools of the KGB trade, to aid in the ill-fated crackdown of the rebellion. Other than Yeltsin, few in positions of authority seemed overly surprised much less outraged by the worst acts of barbarism.

This boded ominously for the prosecution of our abductors. The

first bad sign was that for eight months we heard nothing about the progress of the case. After grilling us so thoroughly on every detail, nobody in Moscow seemed to care much about informing us. The sympathetic Colonel Andrei Zharov had left the MVD to go into the spice-selling business, yet only he kept in touch with us. In fact, it was Andrei, at our request, who snooped around and found the facts, some of which were rather distressing.

The investigation, it seems, was completed in September. The trial was set for December, and the prosecutor pending the trial released the gang of five from jail. Andrei's experience and his instincts told him this would be a preface to more lenience shown the kidnappers. The implication was clear: The state would get convictions in its 'war' on underworld crime, but the perpetrators themselves would suffer little.

'God only knows how the case will end,' Andrei wrote to us early in September. 'That is why myself and other people who worked on the case consider that you should use all the official channels (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Australia, Australian Embassy in Moscow and mass media) to express protest against [the] Moscow prosecutor actions. That is because the case is of international interest.'

The idea that Miasnikov and his cohorts were even now out on the loose where no one could watch them scared us silly, but prosecutor Gennady Lobanov had little sympathy—and apparently no use—for Danny and me. He cabled us later that month about the court date, saying that because Grigory had signed a statement admitting he had organised the kidnapping, we weren't required to attend the trial. Not that we had any intentions of going to Moscow in any case, but it seemed like a kiss-off, as if he didn't want us there to complicate things. It was a private party.

Perhaps not coincidentally, when we asked the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to see if they could acquire transcripts of the impending trial, the judge flatly refused the request. It didn't take a leap of imagination to wonder if the last thing he wanted was any public scrutiny of what would happen in his courtroom, and if bribes would trump evidence—and in fact already had.

The trial began on December 10 in Moscow's Frunzensky Regional Court, Hall No. 10. Because of the unwritten laws against kidnapping and extortion, the official charge lodged against the gang was 'racketeering with aggravating circumstances,' a nebulous catch-all we feared would be aggravating only to us in the end. By now, Lobanov had stopped communicating with us, so we knew nothing of what transpired behind those closed doors. Then, on December 31, the

Australian Embassy in Moscow received a cryptic cable that read: 'The verdict handed down this afternoon sentenced the three men accused to six months' imprisonment, but in view of the time already spent in custody, they were released.'

When we read those cold, sanitised sentences, it had the effect of another thudding kick in the gut and a stinging slap in the face at the same time. For the men 'sentenced' to no additional time, it was a slap on the wrist. But which men were they? Why only three? We had no answers, since the judge allowed no transcripts to be seen or further details to be heard.

Things became a bit clearer when out of the sewer popped Grigory Miasnikov himself to spout off in public. Seeking as wide an audience as he could for his ego, Miasnikov offered himself to Australian television shows to talk about the still-highly-charged case and appeared on A Current Affair in early January. Only now did it become known that the cases were closed on Orloff and Robert (whose real name was Vladimir Shemeken). They had apparently accepted plea-bargain deals in exchange for testifying against Grigory and Oleg, as ringleaders of the plot, in a separate trial.

However, Miasnikov defiantly maintained his innocence; in his twisted logic, to him, Danny and I were more guilty.

Perspiring heavily and wearing a creepy fixed smile, he once again showed himself to be a strutting narcissist, beyond shame. It was most sickening and galling. He was so unrepentant, so sanguine about what had happened to us—and so confident about getting off so easily. Incredibly, he had just proclaimed to the joint ventures that he was reinstating himself as general director of Video Technology. Never mind that the company no longer existed. That didn't seem to faze him. Miasnikov obviously still saw a gold mine in us through our connections—if not us ourselves.

For us, he had nothing but contempt and didn't seem to care how badly it reflected on him to verbally savage us. Among his crackpot ravings was that we really weren't beaten at all, that we'd only been 'struck' twice and had only 'surface injuries.' Just as bizarre, he claimed that 'there were no plans to kill them, only to put them on trial, put them on investigation,' and that 'the punishment [was justified] for this crime.'

Saving his most demented words for me, he labelled me a 'stupid bitch' who 'deserved what happened to her.'

'They tried to rob me,' he oozed shamelessly. 'They cheated us; they were in debt to forty companies. What happened was because of them. They made possible what happened.'

Whatever he hoped to gain from this front of vitriol and lies didn't work. Fixing a case is one thing; going public with manic

arrogance is another. The 'connections' he had boasted would save him turned out not to be there. He too was convicted, as was Oleg. Yet in the end, all the convictions—and the trials themselves—were merely for show, to pad prosecutors' records and give the Russian cops and government something to crow about. Like the others, Grigory and Oleg were given empty six-month sentences and immediately set free on time served, getting not a day more for leading a plot that made prisoners out of two innocent people who were battered, kicked, and tortured, leaving us with psychological scars until the day we die.

For what happened to me at that cursed dacha, violated as I was like a slab of meat by a man who was never even arrested or prosecuted, they all deserved to have acid poured on them and have their flesh peeled off. I only wish I could be the one doing the pouring.

A headline in one of the Australian papers said it right: 'NO JUSTICE FOR COUPLE.' Yet we had to live with the tainted verdict handed down by a corrupt and perverted legal system. We had to let go of the notion of getting even, lest we be prisoners of our own minds forever. There are times when I can do that, forget, not look back. I don't think I will ever really be free, and for that I am angry. Angry and scared. Because I am, I won't ever let go of my hatred for those animals.

I wish I could say I don't care anymore, because they don't deserve the satisfaction of knowing I do. That won't happen until I see their rotting corpses lying in the gutter.

By early 1993, our hopes of reprising our financial Xanadu were slipping away. Trying to keep alive our corporate status, we managed to buy what is called a 'shelf company,' that is, one that had gone bust and then sold at a discount by its officers from 'off the shelf.' We kept it going for a few months, but we couldn't raise enough capital from our software-development business to keep it afloat. And so, in the middle of the year, both the new company and the software business had gone the way of Video Technology, into the grave.

Our resources were dwindling. We were living from savings and now, it was time to swallow all that over-inflated pride of living the high life.

For example, I had been making my own homemade, hand-sewn 'scrunchies,' those bow-like hair ties women use, never giving a second thought to somehow making money from them. I just had very thick hair I wanted to get out of my face. One day, I went to a fabric

store to buy some tartan material to make them. The next day, I just happened to walk into a Sportsgirl store, being one of a large chain. The salesgirl noticed the scrunchie in my hair and commented on the fact that they were a large size for girls with thick, long hair. She asked me if I had samples; I told her six. She asked if I would take the samples to the Sportsgirl distribution centre to show the buyer, which I did. The very same afternoon, she ordered three thousand scrunchies! I was astounded. She asked if it was possible that they be made and delivered in ten days.

I did the math and found that, with the percentage she was offering me, I could make several thousand dollars, after the expense of buying enough fabric for that massive job. For the next week, I sat at home, cutting fabric, threading elastic bands, and sewing on a huge, old industrial sewing machine that Danny's uncle had in the warehouse he once owned. My parents helped, and the kids pitched in. We made it a family undertaking. By the week's end, we had made all three thousand. Even though I just collapsed in a heap from fatigue, I was very proud of what I had achieved.

The irony wasn't lost on me that only a year or so before, I was living the jet-set life, globe-trotting to exotic places, being a high-powered businesswoman with deals in the millions on the table and danger nipping at my high heels. Now here I was using that table to manufacture scrunchies to make ends meet. The weirdest irony of all was that I didn't miss the old lifestyle one bit. Doing manual labor to complete a rush assignment, and knowing I had done it, gave me deeper feelings of satisfaction. Besides, the danger, as I had learned, was something I could do without.

I missed the money. There was none to throw around on expensive dinners, vacations, or trinkets, but only enough on which to live. We had lost just about everything. The next step for us was to quit dreaming and hit the pavement and find jobs, like real people do. Danny managed to secure a software-development contract for a transport company, and I, knowing nothing about the recruitment industry, landed a position at Adecco Personnel, earning $40,000 a year, for which I was grateful. The pressure and worry were beginning to level off in matters of money and security.

The same, however, could not be said about our marriage. On my part, at least, I was heartsick that Danny and I had morphed into different people than we were when we had married. We had grown testy and distant; the genesis of the problem, in retrospect, was that strange and awkward moment in the Ministry of Interior when I saw him for the first time after being rescued when he held back his emotions. I began to back away from him. On a subconscious level, we irrationally blamed each other for the pain we felt and would always

feel; or else we couldn't push away the memories as long as we had to look at each other. Whatever the psychological answer was, where once we had grown in unison, we now began to grow apart, unable to make peace with ourselves, our own insecurities, our own demons, much less that of each other.

I had believed that barrier would naturally come down, but it never did. I knew before he did, I'm sure, that the marriage was over. Danny, in fact, seemed in denial; despite the fact that he looked at me differently and behaved differently, he was set in the ways of marriage and what he believed to be true love. Or, perhaps he did know it was over, too, but refused to admit it to himself and to other people, wishing not to face that stigma. He needed a shield from all that, so he went along as if the marriage was inherently strong. In the same way, he was able to recover from our ordeal far quicker than I could. Sometimes I wished I had that ability to be emotionless, cold, not feeling what I really felt.

A prime example of that divergence was our lovemaking. While we went about it, and Danny was fine with it, for me it was never out of love or desire, only obligation. I did it because I wanted Danny to be happy. Within my soul, it brought no relief from the emptiness. I suppose it didn't help that I could not get out of my thoughts the horrible night I was violated at the dacha; like a Freudian nightmare, the more I tried pushing it away, the more it would torment me and reignite the inner debate I was having about whether to tell Danny—whether I ever would be able to tell Danny. Not telling him always won the debate, and the fact that I was not being completely truthful with him weighed me down with guilt.

What's more, I also could not stop fretting that Sascha the Snake had given me a venereal disease. I confided this dread to my local doctor, who administered blood tests. They all came back negative, but the mental scar took a greater toll on me than any disease.

Well into 1994, more than a year after the kidnapping, I was still a prisoner, of my own mind. I felt claustrophobic, like I wanted to launch into great primal screams or else implode from all the psychological ravages I'd suffered. One day, I woke up and I just couldn't put off any longer making a break from the marriage. I just didn't love Danny anymore. I knew I had to leave him.

If we'd been characters in a fictional story, the happy ending would have stretched beyond the rescue. We would have become closer in our shared pain and victory. Our love would have found new avenues in which to flourish and a deeper pool of trust and respect from which to draw, new adventures to share.

Unfortunately, as we learned, life is not a love story; it's terribly and heartbreakingly complicated, and too often a tragedy. It makes

one cry more than laugh. It's a mystery none of us will ever be able to figure out.

There's only one thing I know for sure. My life, in so many ways, was altered by those eleven days in Purgatory.

The odd thing, given his immediate reaction after the rescue, was that Danny seemed to rebound emotionally to everyday life far more quickly and far better than I. Again, that was his shielding, his blocking of debilitating trauma before it had a chance to linger and fester. He just had a way of letting things slide. Like the marriage. Despite all the warning signs, he was a little shocked when I told him I was leaving. But I was the headstrong one. He knew he couldn't stand in my way. He may have even thought that if I'd go, I would get this nonsense out of my system and be back.

No, that was not going to happen. At the same time, however, I was not about to hurt him. Why would I? I didn't leave him because I didn't care for him. There was not a whit of bitterness involved. No one was to blame; it was just something that happened. I take pride, in fact, in saying our separation was very likely the most congenial one in history. It wasn't for the usual reasons. In fact, after I left, we 'dated' for a while, because we always adored each other's company and because it was still a natural thing for us to be in each other's lives. After I had taken Melanie and Romy and moved into a three-bedroom flat in Caulfield, Danny helped me get settled. Knowing I had to go to work very early in the morning, he would come by every day at 7am to stay with Melanie and then take her to kindergarten.

Things would get a little bumpy for us in the ensuing years, over things not even worth mentioning, but I don't hesitate in the least to say that Danny Weinstock was, and is, one of the kindest men I have ever known in my life.

When I left, I took very little, nor did I want anything. I was perfectly prepared to rebuild my life now on my own. In time, Danny did come around to accept that I would not be coming home. We slowly began to drift our separate ways—still bonded by the fact that we were still technically married, never having bothered to file divorce papers. Neither one of us was overly eager to go careening into another marriage. We both agreed amicably to share custody of Melanie. Having done that, Danny and I considered it case closed, at least for a while.

That turned out to be six years. With the dawning of a new millennium came a new life direction for me that no one, least of all me, could have possibly foreseen.

The past years had brought stability, but changes. At age twenty-one, Romy had become intrigued by our family's ancestral roots in Israel and went there to live. Melanie was now a poised young lady of

eleven. And me? I was forty-four, back on my feet financially, and satisfied that my life did not depend on dreams of being a member of the super-rich class. Neither did I fancy meeting a frog that would turn into a mythical prince.

And so, of course, as often happens when you're not looking for something out of a romance novel, I did find a prince, at least in my eyes.

In July of 2000, I met Sam Bornstein, a forty-three-year-old American visiting Melbourne. I did have relationships since separating from Danny, but I had erected my own self-defense mechanism not to let myself get too close to anyone, emotionally. Either that or I wasn't meeting anyone to whom I wanted to get that close. Sam, I knew immediately, could take down my fortress walls; indeed, they didn't seem to stand very long whenever we talked.

And did we ever talk. Sam had many qualities that can attract a woman's eye. Six foot three inches tall, tapered at the waist, and ruggedly handsome, he cut a dashing figure just walking down the street. Just as diverting, though, was his sensitivity and intellect, a very rare combination. Recently divorced, he was the father of seven- and twelve-year-old daughters. His family roots were in the Jewish ghettos of Poland.

Clearly, he was a man with whom I had much in common, and our endless conversations proved as much. Sitting over coffee or on a park bench with him, I found myself talking about anything and everything under the sun, including feelings locked in my heart that I thought I had blotted out in pain. In turn, he was fascinated by my misadventure in Moscow. Never, he said, had he known anyone as strong in constitution as I was to have survived that. We found ourselves wanting to see each other, needing to, and he extended his stay for that purpose.

There seemed no end to his depth. When we ate at my home for the first time, he shooed me out of the kitchen and whipped up a delicious meal for us—he is a gourmet cook. Some might call him a Renaissance man; to me, he was a mensch, as our people say, meaning a 'decent man.'

With no hesitation at all, we had plunged into a whirlwind courtship, with neither of us really paying any mind to the logistical snag that he lived in America, in Southern California, and I in Australia.

Sam confronted the geography issue head on. Sam asked me to visit him in September, which I did.

My departure date for America was September 18. On that day, I was half-dazed with excitement. My friend Rhonda drove me to Melbourne International Airport. I was on my way to Sam.

After spending less than a month in Los Angeles, I knew full well that we were both smitten. I was head over heels when he asked me to marry him. Only he could have made me even consider such a thing, and I'm sure he would not have taken no for an answer. Moreover, after making the decision, no one in my family could tell me I would be wrong to say yes to such a momentous course change in my life. Not that they didn't want me to remain in Australia, but they also knew I still had that adventurous streak in me.

The clincher for me was that Melanie approved right away, as did Romy. When I called Romy in Israel and Melanie in Australia to tell them, they both said they never heard me sound as happy.

'If your heart tells you to be impulsive,' Romy said, 'then you should be. You've earned the right to be happy.'

Sam wasn't a rich man, but he had done something he enjoyed—being close to animals—and made a very nice living from it. For sixteen years, he had owned a pet store in Thousand Oaks, California, lived in a comfortable home, and visited with his daughters regularly. That, he said, would be my home as well after we were married. He wouldn't take no for an answer on that one, either.

And so we planned to wed in the springtime, another American couple's love story. That's right, an American couple. I was going to live in America. I could hardly believe it.

They say if you wait long enough in life, good things will make up for the bad. Sam made me believe that to be true. I couldn't help but think back to my divorce from Avi. Back then, I was stalked and terrorised by a man who had said he loved me. Now, I was safely in the arms of a man who not only loved me but was going to give me a whole new life. Talk about your romance novels. Sometimes, even for a confirmed cynic like me, life does imitate art, after all.

When Sam and I had made the decision to marry, Danny had not been happy about Melanie leaving Australia. He didn't want her to leave until she'd finished sixth grade with her class in December. I'm sure he wanted to go further, to keep her from going at all, but Danny knew she would be better off with her mother. Rather than pick a fight about the school issue, I went along with it as a compromise, though living apart from Melanie for those few months made my insides hurt. All that, of course, meant I finally had reason to divorce Danny.

I must say I felt right at home in California. Sam owned a small condominium that in time we would sell and then buy a lovely house

in a cul-de-sac of six houses set against a background of beautiful mountains in the distance. The sky seemed always to be azure blue and the weather warm and comforting. Sam's two girls, who would be my new stepdaughters, were adorable and took to me right away, as did I to them.

Sam's pet store, called 'For Pet's Sake,' was well managed. While that allowed us to spend most of our time together, we became somewhat restless. Or maybe I should say I became restless, a trait that always seems to recur in me wherever I go. In 2001, we opened a small bookshop.

My life now was about as far removed as possible from my erstwhile obsession to make the Joneses keep up with me and my business life of high-pressure, leveraged-to-the-hilt, multi-million-dollar deals with seedy characters. For that I was grateful. Those yearnings were out of my blood forever.

On May 20, 2001, Sam and I were married at the home of a wonderful couple, Arie and Rivka, whom Sam had known for many years. It was a lovely affair, with sixty guests in attendance, and the ceremony was in a big, pastoral garden out back, under a shining midday sun and a chupa we had made ourselves. Of course, it wouldn't be a wedding of mine without some typical looniness—the rabbi was a young man who doubled as a professional stand-up comic, and the occasion gave him an audience to try out his material during the service. I only wish that Billie, Wally, Romy, and my sisters could have been there for the happiest day of my life.

As lovely as the path to my future was, the past still intruded, rudely. I could never tell when it would happen; it just did. Mainly, it sprung from inside my psyche. For instance, the first time I drove in the dizzying, chaotic swirl of traffic on the Hollywood Freeway into Los Angeles, my hands began to shake, and I broke out in a sweat. It wasn't merely the frantic pace of the cars but rather a frightful feeling of being cooped up in a small space with no way to get out.

These were feelings that had been ingrained in my mind from the hours of forced captivity in that dark, freezing cellar under the dacha. Being in the car, trapped in traffic, was the stimulus that let it all out again. I actually would have flashbacks as I drove, of the wooden stairs, of Oleg standing over me menacingly with his nail-embedded stick. I didn't know if I could make it home or if I'd run off the road. Now I only drive on the freeway if it is absolutely necessary.

Sleep was no easier either. Closing my eyes took me back to Noginsk. Insomnia is my defense, and sleeping pills are still the only way to break it down, though I have been able to at least wean my way down to half the dosage I used to require.

There is no defense, however, against the reality that the Russian

Mafia has spread to America, with a particularly virulent strain of cutthroat criminals taking up residence in Southern California. It was one such expatriate Ukrainian sleazeball who in 1997 ruthlessly murdered Bill Cosby's son Ennis in cold blood on the side of a road in Los Angeles. As well, I know of al-Qaeda 'sleeper' cells infiltrating into communities, biding their time waiting for orders to wreak havoc with some bloody deed. The same sort of sleepers exist in the Russian Mobs. Could they have again teamed up with al-Qaeda the way they did in Noginsk to come after me—not for money but to kill me, to complete the job they botched? Will the order come down tomorrow?

These are not idle thoughts. They are daily thoughts.

I don't make the al-Qaeda connection lightly or take dramatic license by mentioning it. It was only recently that such a connection was presented to me, to my astonishment, by a very, very credible source: Dimitry Afanasiev.

Sometime in 2002, I suddenly developed a nagging urge to find out as much about the operation that freed me and decided to track down the mysterious Russian who had played such a dramatic role in it. He had returned to Russia by then, and I had no idea where to find him. I still had the original FBI press release in which all the players in the mission were acknowledged. One of them was Jerry Shestak, and thankfully his law office number was listed in the release, so I called him. Jerry was thrilled to hear from me and readily furnished me with Dimitry's number in Moscow.

I developed a regular phone-calling routine with Dimitry, exchanging details of our experiences and our current lives. They were long and enjoyable conversations, and during one of the calls, he was very excited. He told me he was coming to Los Angeles in December for a friend's wedding and asked if we could get together and have dinner. Of course, I couldn't wait for the meeting, which took place at the Mondrian Hotel in Hollywood. Dimitry had on his arm a beautiful and very tall young blonde woman named Natasha, whom he would marry. We must have chatted away for at least four hours; Sam and I were so transfixed that we forgot we'd parked our car at a meter. When we left, it had been towed away.

By now, Dimitry had become arguably the most influential lawyer in Russia. His firm of Egorov, Puginsky, Afanasiev and Partners had, since 1993, represented both the Russian government and private corporations in international business affairs, as well as Western companies doing business in Russia. He is also an expert in global terrorism, especially the breeding grounds in the old Soviet states where allegedly discarded nuclear materials are thought to be hidden.

His expertise had been crucial to the rescues, and apparently my tale of terror had stuck in his mind. He said he'd been curious about a

few things in the ensuing years. He never had quite bought the storyline in some news accounts of the episode that the kidnappers were gypsies—just as I didn't. I always believed they were ex-KGB agents, though that was impossible to prove.

'They may have called themselves gypsies,' he said, 'but they weren't. From what I've been able to deduce, they were actually Chechens.'

He then wove for me the genesis of the al-Qaeda movement, how it was spawned in Afghanistan by Osama bin Laden and spread like a virus into Chechnya, how well-heeled Westerners were their prime targets of opportunity, and how extorted money became a sea of money and was funneled through to the al-Qaeda network.

These revelations floored me. It was now a year after 9/11, and never had I imagined, even in my feverish mind, that the bastards who flew planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon could actually have been made of the same terrorist cloth as those who had brutalised me.

That was mind-bending enough. More outrageously, however, was that, according to Dimitry, Boris Yeltsin, knowing of the scum in his midst and their capacity for catastrophic damage, had tried to warn the first President Bush about the budding al-Qaeda nexus as far back as the early 1990s—only to be ignored, with disastrous consequences after his son became president.

Trying as I have not to let paranoia run amok within me, every once in a while something will happen that absolutely freaks me out. In the spring of 2004, I began receiving strange phone calls. Someone on the other end with a heavy Russian accent would mutter a few words in Russian, then say the word death or dead in English and hang up. The first couple of times, I passed it off to be a wrong number, but the calls continued.

At around the same time, two swarthy men came into the bookshop and stood there staring at me. They never removed a book off a shelf or bought anything. I also found in my email an incomprehensible message written in gibberish—or some sort of code—sent from an email address in Russia.

Were all these things just some weird coincidence? Or was I being stalked?

Unnerved, I called the FBI's office in Los Angeles. I expected to be figuratively patted on the head and told I was watching too many bad spy movies. Surprisingly, they took it seriously. I had given them the telephone number that had appeared on my phone whenever I received such calls. The following day, two FBI agents—as well as a Los Angeles County sheriff's deputy—came to speak with me. They explained that my 1992 experience was still a high-interest matter,

given the epidemic of Russian Mob-related crime in the area—not to mention the terrorist implications. They soaked up every detail I could provide, and though there was little they could do, they did open a case file and promised immediate priority would be given to any future incidents.

I didn't know whether I should be relieved or even more terrified by that visit.

Fortunately, though, the calls stopped, and there were no further inscrutable emails, no more suspicious stragglers who came into the shop. Who knows, maybe if someone was out there to get me, he may also know that the FBI would be on his case. Whatever the reason, I breathed a little easier. But who knows what will happen tomorrow?

Thank God Sam understands me and can talk me through little crises like these. It can't be an easy job to put up with me. But I don't think I could get by without him.

The same goes for my whole family, which is why I also thank God for those discount long-distance calling cards. If Billie, Wally, and Romy can't be in my eyes, at least they can be in my ears.

Romy did come to Los Angeles to be with me after the happiest day of her life, when in August 2004 she married her perfect man. Thus began some new, happy adventures, that of a mother-in-law.

Considering the alternative and what might have been had those men wearing green army jackets waving machine guns arrived a few minutes later than they did, I'm up for just about anything.

EPILOGUE

Danny Weinstock lives in Australia. We are on good terms and have regular contact. Matthew Hurd and Richard Markson reside in Melbourne, Australia.

Mikhail Rud continued to flourish in Vladivostok's high-level mercantile trade circles. In the mid-'90s, he became director of the Runo Company and founded the Ussurisk Central Market—the largest Chinese trade market in the Russian Far East. During this time, Ussurisk's customs officers became rife with corruption. Rud, apparently knee-deep in the sludge, may have made one bribe demand too many. On April 12, 1998, at age forty-five, he was ambushed on Ussurisk's Kalugina Street by a pack of gunmen who shot him through the head. The murder, which police called a contract hit, was one of three killings of suspected underworld figures within a week in the area, including the rubout of a Mafia boss known as Shurup, or 'The Screw.'

For Yvonne, his gruesome demise produced an ambivalent reaction: 'To be sure, if Rud did organise the kidnap plot, he received his just desserts, and it meant I had one less threat to worry about. However, it was also proof that Rud may have run in circles that will stop at nothing to carry out a hit. Could he have handed off my 'hit' to another mobster before being whacked? And could he conceivably have gotten it because he failed in the plot against Danny and me? Truthfully, I think I would rather not have heard about his death. It just makes me think about scenarios like this, and that's the last thing I want to do.'

Dimitry Afanasiev built a large, well established law firm in Russia and has since added an office in the USA. The name of the firm is Egorov, Puginsky, Afanasiev & Partners. In 2004, he was recruited by the Russian Foreign Ministry to lead a team of lawyers to defend two Russian agents accused of assassinating Zelimkhan Yandarbiev, an exiled Chechen who the Russian government alleged was behind the well-publicised Moscow theatre siege by terrorists in 2002 and who was blown up in his car in Qatar in February, 2004. Dimitry engaged the assistance of his former mentor, Jerome Shestack of Wolf Block, the law firm where Dimitry had worked on the Weinstocks' case, along with former US Attorney General, Richard Thornburgh.

The arrest of the two agents was a huge black eye for the Russian government. The agents were convicted in June and sentenced to life in prison. Afanasiev claimed that the two men had been seized at a diplomatic villa in violation of the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, that they had been tortured and coerced to give

confessions in breach of the 1984 New York Convention Against Torture. He vowed to bring his clients back to Russia through an appeal or negotiation.

Afanasiev ruminated how Yandarbiev's work on behalf of Chechen/al-Qaeda terrorists had its roots in the kidnappings such as that of the Weinstocks:

'I understand that this man was strongly suspected of being the main conduit for al-Qaeda's funding of the Chechen gangs in Russia, routing money from the Middle East and Afghanistan to Russia. He was on the UN's list of international terrorists whose assets were to be frozen. '

Afanasiev kept his promise to the Russian Foreign Ministry to bring back the Russian agents. Only recently, Dimitry and his partners participated in the negotiations and the handing over of the two defendants to the Russian side. Following intensive discussions with the Qatari law enforcement authorities, Dimitry Afanasiev, his partner Khristofor Ivanyan and Maxim Maximov, Consul General of Russia in Qatar, received the two Russians from the prison in Doha and escorted them aboard a Russian government plane.

Vladimir Borisovich Rushailo gained the most from the rescue operation. Boosted by his glittering success, the ambitious cop kept moving up the Organised Crime Department ladder, from regional director to deputy director. He was then promoted into the Ministry of Internal Affairs leadership, as deputy minister in 1994. A year later, Putin appointed him minister of Internal Affairs; he has been reappointed twice.

Rushailo applied his iron-fist approach, with less success, in the Chechen War by overseeing bloody campaigns against rebel insurgents. He accompanied Putin to the 1999 G-8 Conference on terrorism in Moscow, meeting with, among other VIPs, then-US Attorney General Janet Reno.

Rushailo has vowed to wipe out Islamic militants in the former Soviet states, committing Russian troops to the civil war in Georgia. He may also have been a terrorist target himself. On September 9, 2002, while on an inspection tour of the Far East, a speeding sport utility vehicle crashed head on into his staff car in Kamchatka, leaving six dead including four security officers and the head of the Federal Security Bureau's antiterrorism office. Rushailo sustained serious internal and chest injuries, but escaped death in the incident, which was officially ruled an accident.

Rushailo recovered, and, perhaps as a reward, went on to even loftier posts: secretary of the Security Council and National Security advisor. The Weinstocks' case helped his career a lot.

Gerry Ingrisano remained with the FBI's Newark office until 1996.

He then transferred to the Des Moines, Iowa, office where he is today a special agent and supervisor.

James Pelphrey has had stints as mobile security director at the US Embassy in Belarus and regional security officer at the embassies in Sierra Leone and, currently, in Lagos, Nigeria. Before he left the embassy in Moscow, as a result of the precedent set by the Weinstocks' case, the FBI established a permanent security office in Moscow with the leeway to act on any case involving Americans without Russian authorisation.

Jerry Shestak is still a partner and highly influential attorney at Wolf, Block Philadelphia. (The firm changed its name in 2003.)

Grigory Miasnikov, Vladimir Shemeken ('Robert'), Oleg, Kuzin, Orloff, and the other gang members: Whereabouts unknown.

About the Author

Yvonne Bornstein has been a corporate executive, wife, mother and kidnap victim. She is now an author with this—Eleven Days of Hell—her first book. She lives in Australia with her husband, Sam. As a professional speaker and author, Yvonne has been able to share her story with many individuals and corporations around the world. Even though her life is back on track, she lives and breathes her horrifying experience every day.

Photographs

Summertime, 1958: I'm on the right, at three years old, tightly grouped with my protective mother, Billie, and my sister Erica. Although I'm a year younger than Erica, Mother liked to dress us like twins—and to this day, we swear that when one of us sneezes, the other's nose tingles.

At twelve, showing the sheer joy of spending my Sundays at City Beach in Perth.

1972: Winning the 'New Faces' competition on Australian television with my heartfelt rendition of 'Windmills of Your Mind.' At eighteen, I was headed for fame and fortune—until reality intruded.

This sultry image of me was to be displayed on the cover of my first album, before the project was cancelled. The record company believed it to be sexy, but I thought I looked like a poodle.

Young love in bloom: I married Avi Samuel in Melbourne in 1976.

Although my marriage fell apart, it brought me my first beautiful daughter, Romy, in 1977. She was the most amazing child and brought nothing but joy into my life.

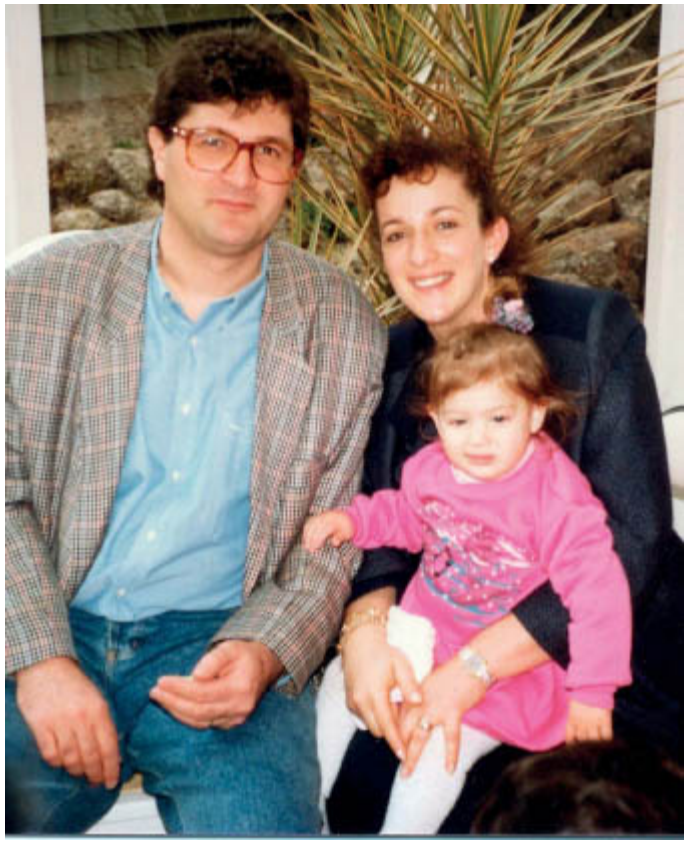
After a messy divorce from Avi and the cold-blooded murder of my prospective fiance,

George, Danny Weinstock came along to pick up the pieces of my broken life and became my second husband in 1987.

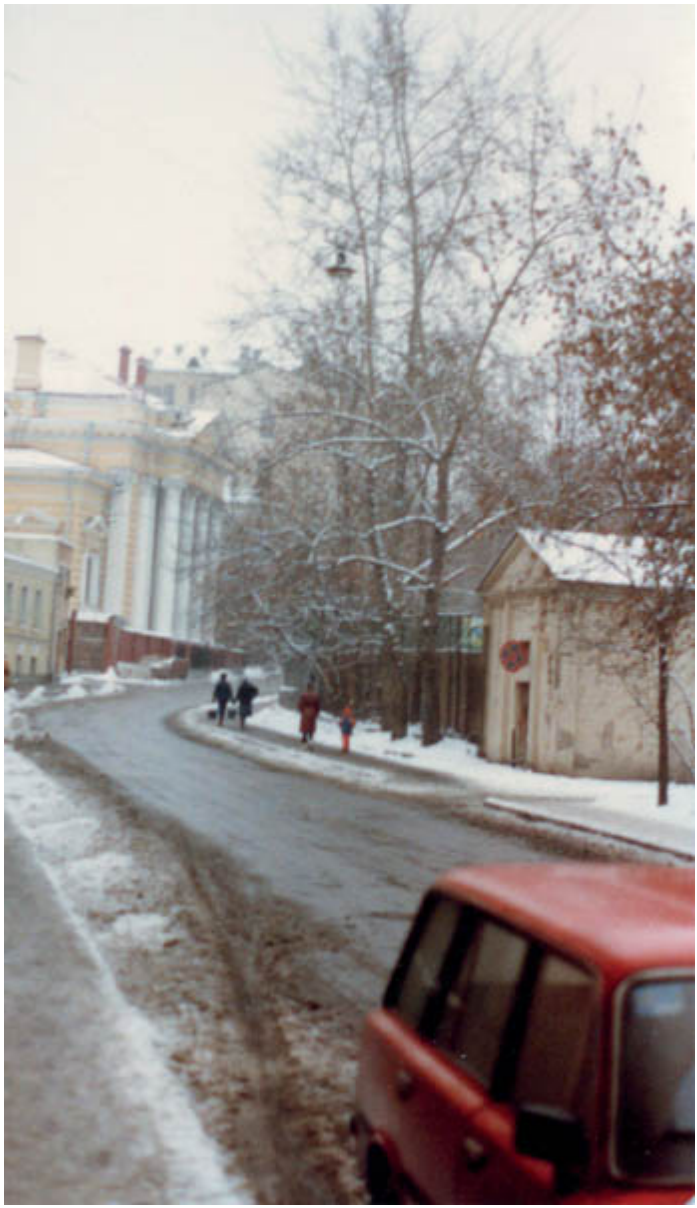
Here is Melanie minutes after delivery in Danny's arms. Having nearly died in childbirth, I didn't hold her for two days.

Here we are enjoying the summer sunshine in Surfer's Paradise, Queensland, with our nanny, Susan, holding Melanie. She was always a water baby.

At the Melbourne Zoo with one-year-old Melanie in 1990. I always loved motherhood—but I had greater ambitions than being a housewife and mother.



Family portrait, 1991, only months before our ambitions of being a corporate couple would carry Danny and me to our fateful landing in Moscow.



Before 1992, we'd been to Moscow twice and enjoyed exploring its environs. On this small and winding street was the one and only stately old synagogue. During the Soviet regime, when we went inside for the service, KGB agents stood in the back, keeping tabs on us and other Jews.

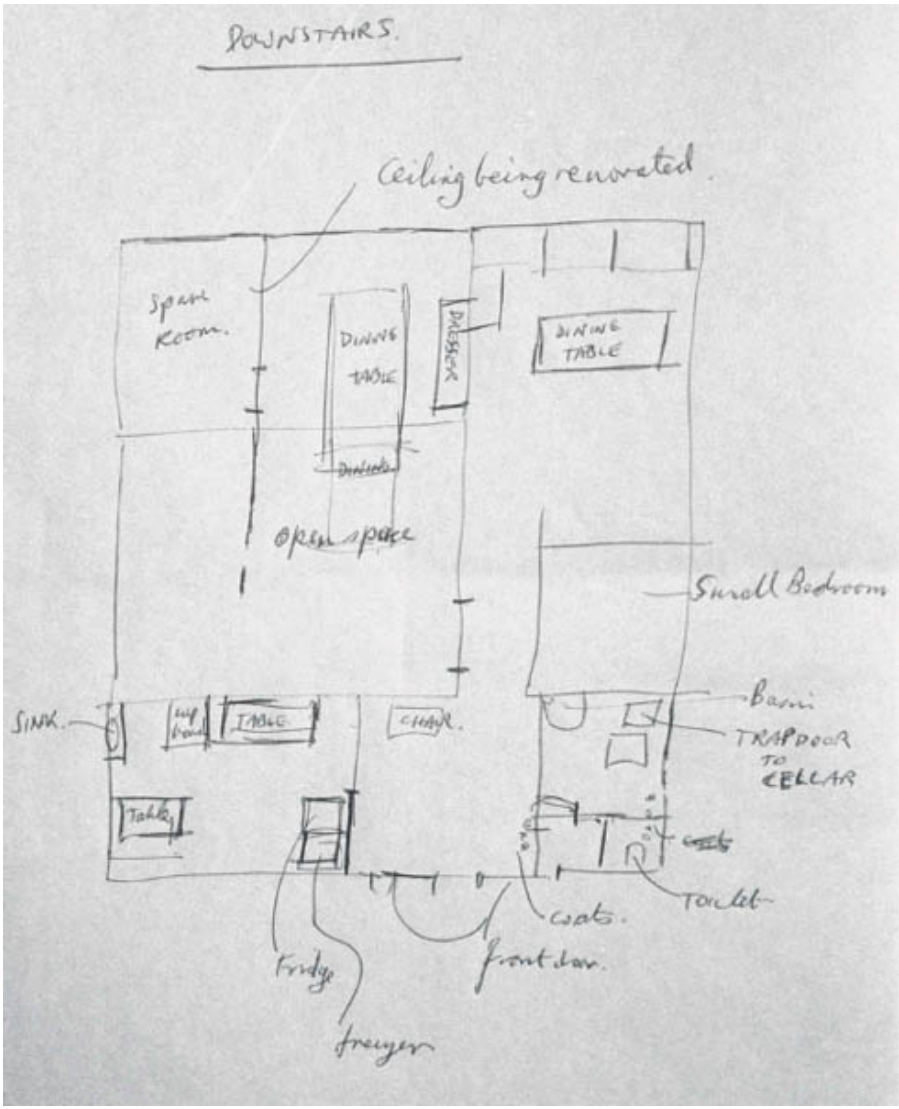
These big-boned Russian women treated me like an old friend at a party thrown in our honour. They served us so much vodka that Danny had to be carried out of the house at night's end but I managed to hold my own.

The gray and ominous view of downtown Moscow in 1991 from the window of the Sputnik Hotel, where we met the 'business partner' Mikhail Rudd. He would make our next visit to Russia a living hell.

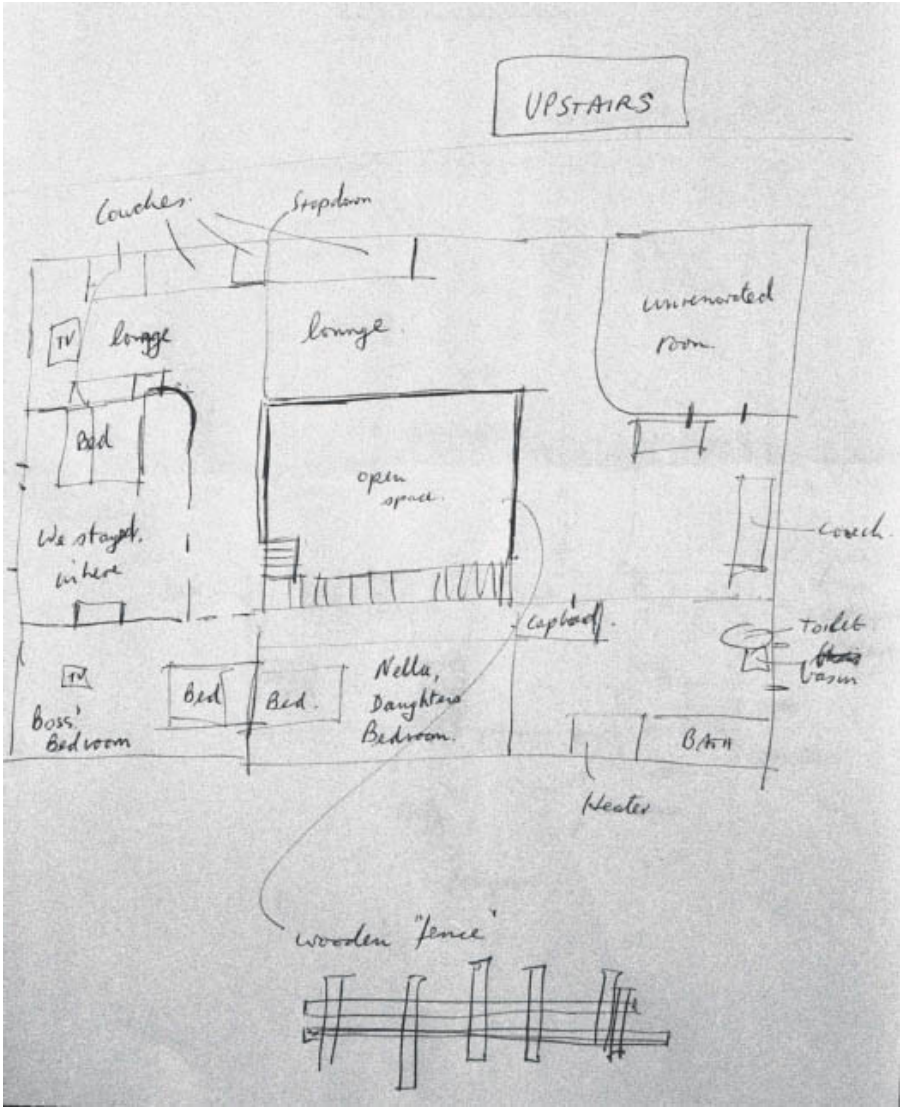
Me in front of our favourite Moscow residence, the Peking Hotel, where the Chinese restaurant serves only Russian food. We never quite made it here on our final trip, when our lodging became a horror house in the country.

Dimitry Afanasiev: A brilliant young Russian lawyer living in America in 1992. His behind-the-scenes exchange of information to Russian authorities was the key link between the FBI and Russian police, leading to our rescue.

Colonel Vladimir Rushailo: Grim-faced, iron-fisted, and ruthlessly seeking glory, he stopped at nothing to track down our kidnappers. He was rewarded with promotions to the highest levels of the Russian government.

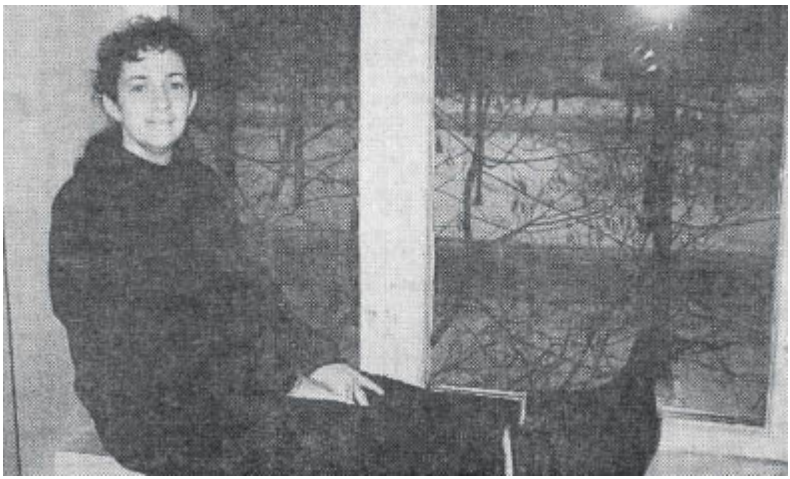


With the interior of the 'dacha' that was our prison for eleven days seared into our brains, Danny and I later drew from memory this blueprint of the place for the Russian cops.



The upstairs bedroom marked 'we stayed here,' the 'unrenovated room' where we were beaten, and the downstairs 'trapdoor to cellar' still make my blood run cold.

The face of the evil Mikhail Rud, our partner-turned-tormentor who hatched the kidnap plot. He went the way of most corrupt Mob bosses. He was slain on the streets of Vladivostok in a contract-style killing.



Danny took this picture of me in the 'safe house' where we stayed after our rescue. I managed to smile through the pain and fear, but I hardly moved from that ledge for two days, watching out the window for lurking strangers.

This is an exact replica of the Zil automobile in which I was kidnapped ten minutes after leaving Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport.

Московский городской Совет
народных депутатов
ИСПОЛНИТЕЛЬНЫЙ КОМИТЕТ
ГЛАВНОЕ УПРАВЛЕНИЕ
ВНУТРЕННИХ ДЕЛ

Управление уголовного розыска

18.01.92. № _____

г. Москва

Начальнику ОКПП "Москва"
полковнику

тов. Назаренко А.А.

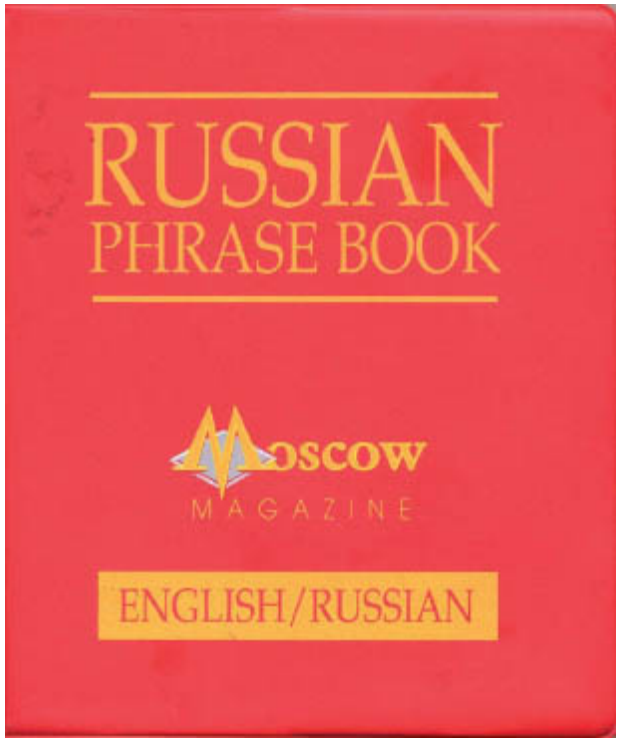
Сообщаю, что в настоящее время СУ ГУВД г. Москвы расследуется уголовное дело № 60502, из материалов которого усматривается, что г-н Даниэль Вайнсток и г-жа Ивона Вайнсток, прибывшие в г.Москву 6 января 1992 г. из Австралии были похищены по дороге из аэропорта Шереметьево-2, незаконно удерживались и были лишены свободы передвижений в период с 6 по 16 января 1992 г. в связи с чем не имели возможности внести в свои визы регистрационные отметки о месте проживания.

В связи с изложенным прошу оказать содействие в их выезде.

Начальник управления
полковник милиции Ю.Г. Федосеев

The letter from the Ministry of Internal Affairs pulling strings so that we could leave the country without delay. After the rescue, this letter was the closest thing to an apology we ever received for our suffering from the powers that be in Russia. Later, Russia's corrupt court system made a mockery of justice at the kidnappers' trial.

When we arrived in Melbourne, Danny and I tried to talk publicly about the ordeal, but I couldn't keep from breaking down in tears. It took years for me to stop crying and move ahead.



We used this now battered Russian phrase book to communicate with our captors. They used it to demand money from us. I've kept it as a memento to remind me of the strength it took to survive the nightmare.

After putting the agony of the kidnapping behind us, Danny and I tried to resume life as the loving and affectionate couple we had been, but my expression gives away my feeling that our marriage would never be the same. The marriage ended in 1994.

With Melanie on her eleventh birthday in 2000—just before I left for America. If I look happier, it's because I had met the man of my dreams.

His name is Sam Bornstein. I waited forty-four years for him to find me. He made everything right in my life.

Copyright

First published in Australia in 2008 by
New Holland Publishers (Australia) Pty Ltd
Sydney • Auckland • London • Cape Town
www.newholland.com.au
1/66 Gibbes Street Chatswood NSW 2067 Australia
218 Lake Road Northcote Auckland New Zealand
86 Edgware Road London W2 2EA United Kingdom
80 McKenzie Street Cape Town 8001 South Africa
Published by AuthorHouse in the USA in 2005
Copyright © 2008 New Holland Publishers (Australia) Pty Ltd
Copyright © 2008 in text Yvonne Bornstein
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publishers and copyright holders.
A record of this book is held at the National Library of Australia
ISBN 9781741107937
e-ISBN 9781921655395